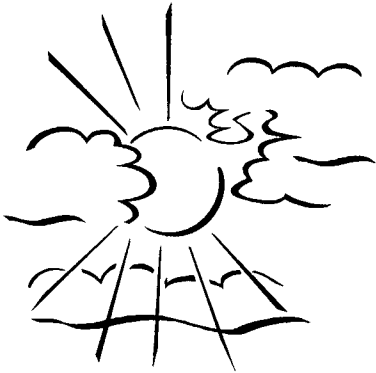


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Health Care



*Important story at this spot

Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, January 3, 2006

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TOPIC	PAGE
*Welfare Reform	2-10
*Vulnerable Adults	11-17
*Child Abuse/Neglect/Protection	18-34
Child Custody	35
Health Care	36-48
Adoption	49-53
Juvenile Justice	54-55
Employment	56-57
Charities	58-65
Budget	66-67
Minimum Wage	68-71
Office of Internal Audit	72
Skubick Column	73-74
Mentoring/Stalking Awareness Month	75-76

Welfare provisions extended as negotiations continue

12/29/2005, 4:17 p.m. ET

By AMY F. BAILEY
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — A few provisions in the state's welfare law that were set to expire this weekend will continue for another year as Republican lawmakers and Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm try to reach a compromise on more significant changes.

Granholm signed the one-year extension Thursday, shortly after the House approved it 85-2 in a rare year-end vote.

The vote was scheduled on the last official session day of the year after Granholm vetoed legislation earlier this week that would have made the most sweeping changes to the state's welfare program in a decade, including setting a four-year limit on cash assistance.

The new law extends for one year provisions that allow certain groups, such as the disabled, to be exempt from working and set up penalties for recipients who do not comply with program requirements.

Republican House Speaker Craig DeRoche of Novi and Granholm said they will continue to work together over the next year to come up with a compromise on ways to improve the welfare program, which provides cash assistance to about 212,000 people.

"I remain willing to work with the Legislature to enact legislation that is both firm and compassionate," Granholm said in a written statement.

It is unclear whether the governor and Republicans, who have majorities in the House and Senate, can agree on limiting aid and setting strict sanctions for noncompliance.

DeRoche continued to emphasize the importance of limiting cash assistance days after Granholm vetoed the legislation. She said a lifetime limit would hurt recipients who are following the program's work and training requirements but cannot move out of poverty.

"Forty-eight months is four long years for an able-bodied adult to find work and to get back to work," DeRoche said after Thursday's vote. "Welfare is supposed to be a safety net for those people who cannot find work."

The two sides also have been divided over penalties. Republicans have pushed for a two-year ban from assistance for people who have three violations, but Democrats said that is too harsh. Rep. Chris Kolb of Ann Arbor, one of the House Democrats who worked on the vetoed legislation, said the two sides should focus on areas where they have agreed.

"In reality, we've made agreements on how we want to change our welfare to work system to include more training, education and support in removing the barriers that keep people from self sufficiency," Kolb said. "If you concentrate on all that, you can find ways to reach an agreement on the other things."

Other lawmakers, however, did not think a one-year extension was the answer.

Republican Reps. Lorence Wenke of Richland and Bob Gosselin of Troy voted against it.

Gosselin said he wanted lawmakers and the governor to resolve the issue as early as next month.

"The governor vetoed the bill. She should answer to all the welfare recipients," he said. "We're just kind of playing along by moving the sunset out another year. I would have liked to have moved it to Feb. 1."

Twenty-two representatives were absent for the last formal day of session, called sine die, Latin for "without day." It is important because many new laws take effect 90 days after the session's end.

Fourteen Democrats who didn't vote were: Stephen Adamini of Marquette, Glenn Anderson of Westland, Doug Bennett of Muskegon, Steven Bieda of Warren, Rich Brown of Bessemer, Matthew Gillard of Alpena, Lee Gonzales of Flint, Hoon-Yung Hopgood of Taylor, Tupac Hunter of Detroit, Bill McConico of Detroit, Fred Miller of Mount Clemens, Clarence Phillips of Pontiac, Jim Plakas of Garden City and Steve Tobocman of Detroit.

The eight Republicans were: Bill Caul of Mount Pleasant, Bill Huizenga of Zeeland, Tom Meyer of Bad Axe, Rick Shaffer of Three Rivers, Fulton Sheen of Plainwell, Glenn Steil Jr. of Cascade, Shelley Goodman Taub of Bloomfield Hills and Howard Walker of Traverse City.

The bill to extend expiring provisions in the welfare law is Senate Bill 757.

On the Net: Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Friday, December 30, 2005

Cutoff for welfare aid debated

Reform may be on tap for '06; Granholm vetoed this week GOP plan that included 48-month limit.

By Gary Heinlein and Mark Hornbeck / The Detroit News /

LANSING — Legislative leaders predicted Thursday they will pass new welfare reforms next year, including the controversial four-year public assistance limit proposed in bills Gov. Jennifer Granholm vetoed this week.

Their comments followed House passage of a measure extending current welfare rules for another year. Those rules were set to expire Saturday. The House vote sent the extension to Granholm, who immediately signed it into law. The Senate passed it two weeks ago.

Earlier this week, Granholm's veto struck down a package of new regulations with which the Republican-dominated Legislature had hoped to replace current rules.

Granholm said the 48-month cutoff in that package would have affected 157,000 children. The Michigan Catholic Conference was among the organizations opposing it.

The Democratic governor said 48 months is enough time for able adults to get off welfare and find work. But she said there should be exceptions for those complying with the rules but still unable to become self-supporting because they can't earn enough or face such problems as chronic illness and lack of child care.

Granholm also said that while she backs strengthening sanctions against recipients who fail to comply with work and training rules, penalties prescribed in the Republican bills were too severe.

Republicans continued to criticize her action as they assembled for an unusual late-year House vote on Thursday.

"When it comes to welfare reform, Michigan used to be a national leader," said House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi. "Now, just to keep pace with other states, we need to take dramatic steps again.

"Four years for an able-bodied adult is a long time to spend in the safety net," DeRoche added. He said the governor blocked changes that "would have ended welfare payments for life, offered more education and training for people in poverty, and delivered accountability for taxpayers." Battling state budget troubles, which some experts estimate at \$500 million to \$750 million for 2006-2007, Republicans pledged to seek welfare cost cuts again in 2006.

Democrats said they, too, want to revise welfare laws that set no limit on how long families can collect public assistance but do require adult recipients to seek work, job training and/or additional education to lift them out of poverty.

"Democrats believe that welfare should be a helping hand, not a way of life," said House Democratic Leader Dianne Byrum, D-Onondaga. She said a four-year limit "is very much in the mix and on the table" in the 2006 legislative session and predicted lawmakers can reach an accord.

Byrum accused Republicans of forcing through unacceptable welfare legislation earlier this month to force Granholm's hand. Byrum said prior to that, the two sides had been close to an agreement.

The legislation adopted Thursday keeps current policies in effect through Dec. 31, 2006. The Senate had passed it, as a precaution against Granholm's veto of the reform package, on Dec. 13. Thursday's vote made the brief House session, with 77 of 110 members present, a bit of an anomaly. Only a handful of leaders normally show up for the late-December meeting, at which they make a ceremonial declaration that the Legislature has completed its business for the year.

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Expiring welfare law extended in the nick of time

Friday, December 30, 2005

By Judy Putnam
Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Gov. Jennifer Granholm quickly signed legislation Thursday continuing Michigan's expiring welfare law after House lawmakers, meeting in an unusual holiday session, voted 85-2 to extend it by one year.

The extension was necessary after Granholm Tuesday vetoed another plan that limits individual welfare benefits to 48 months over a lifetime.

Without Thursday's action, portions of the state's 1995 welfare code covering penalties and exemptions to the state's job program, Work First, would expire at midnight Saturday.

That gives lawmakers and Granholm one more year to work out a new welfare-to-work plan.

Republican lawmakers said Michigan is one of only four states without time limits on benefits.

They wanted a four-year limit, with an option to extend to five years in difficult circumstances.

"My contention is the plan we did put on the governor's desk is fair, but firm," said Rep. Jerry Kooiman, R-Grand Rapids, one of the sponsors of the vetoed legislation. "When we come to this point next year, we need to have a welfare system that holds people accountable and includes sanctions for those trying to abuse the system."

But Democrats called for more flexibility to allow the Department of Human Services to waive time limits in cases where parents were complying but not earning enough to leave welfare.

"I simply will not sign a bill that will have the effect of forcing families with children into utter economic desperation or homelessness," the governor said in her veto letter to lawmakers. Those families are barely scraping by, the governor pointed out. A family of three earns \$5,500 a year in cash assistance, about 36 percent of the poverty level, she said.

Rep. Chris Kolb, D-Ann Arbor, a member of the House Appropriations subcommittee on human services, said the governor's veto was needed.

"At the heart of the holiday season, it would have removed struggling mothers and children from cash assistance at a time where our economy is not where we want it to be," he said.

Kooiman said the House and Senate would work with the governor's office to come up with a plan next year, but he said he will insist on accountability.

He said the main point of contention is that Republicans want to spell out the circumstances for exempting a recipient from work requirements and time limits, while the administration wants to give power to the Department of Human Services to determine those circumstances.

"At the end of the day, we need to have a welfare system in Michigan that holds people accountable, holds government accountable and utilizes taxpayer dollars as effectively and efficiently as possible," Kooiman said.

-- Contact Judy Putnam at (517) 487-8888 x232 or e-mail her at jputnam@boothnewspapers.com.

HOUSE PASSES WELFARE EXTENSION; **GRANHOLM GIVES OK**

A one-year extension to Work First exemptions and sanctions for the state's welfare system won House passage Thursday, along with a quick inking from Governor Jennifer Granholm.

The House, meeting for sine die adjournment and what was perhaps one of the shortest sessions where lawmakers were actually present, passed SB 757, now PA 333, which provides for the extensions.

In doing so, House Speaker Craig DeRoche (R-Novi) again expressed his disappointment that the governor had vetoed a package of welfare reform bills aimed at putting a 48-month cap on benefits to recipients.

While not outright calling the governor a "flip-flopper," Mr. DeRoche did say he was confused at Ms. Granholm's support for a lifetime limit and then her vetoing of the legislation.

Welfare reform will not drop off the radar in the New Year, Mr. DeRoche said, adding that further talks between legislators and the administration would occur on the issue.

Rep. Jerry Kooiman (R-Grand Rapids), a key sponsor of the reform package, said providing for an extension does not mean Ms. Granholm is off the hook for restructuring the state's welfare system.

"It is a system of endless enablement, not empowerment, and that needs to be fixed," he said.

The bill passed on 85-2 votes, with 22 members absent. Reps. Bob Gosselin (R-Troy) and Lorence Wenke (R-Richland) cast the only dissenting votes.

Ms. Granholm said she is still willing to work with lawmakers to draft "tough, fair and compassionate welfare reform package."

However, with signing the new law she said, "This law allows the Department of Human Services to avoid needless confusion and expense in providing assistance to Michigan's most vulnerable citizens in need."

MIRS

Thursday, December 29, 2005

Welfare Extension Bill Passed And Signed

Today, the House held a half-an-hour session in which it passed SB 0757, legislation that extends the expiration date of key provisions in Michigan's Social Welfare Act from Dec. 31, 2005 to Dec. 31, 2006. This afternoon, Gov. Jennifer GRANHOLM promptly signed the extension into law.

Because of *Sine Die* the bill had to be passed by the House before noon today in order to take effect.

According to House Speaker Craig DeROCHE (R-Novi), the "emergency" vote was crucial to efforts to keep the debate alive over "important" welfare reforms, including a four-year limit on cash payments and "updated" education and job training programs.

Translation — the Republicans plan to pursue these reforms in 2006.

However, the more immediate and pragmatic purpose for passing the bill was to prevent bureaucratic confusion and expense following Granholm's veto of a welfare reform package on Tuesday. (See "House to Return Thursday as Gov. Vetoes Welfare Reform," 12/27/05.) In her veto statement, Granholm recommended that the House hurry up and move SB 0757, to avoid "needless confusion and expense."

The Governor's news release on the subject pointed out that the extension keeps parents of young children, those receiving Supplemental Security Income, the disabled and those caring for the disabled from having to participate in the Work First program. Public Act 333 also allows the Department of Human Services (DHS) to continue to impose sanctions on those who fail to keep up with their child support, among other things.

DHS reported last week that it felt it didn't need the now-passed extension to continue doing what its been doing. Department officials asked the Attorney General for his formal ruling on the subject. But to be on the safe side, the Legislature passed the extension anyway.

In spite of the various intricacies of the legislation, in the mainstream news media, the issue has largely played out as being a battle over the 48-month lifetime limitation, supposedly for "able-bodied" recipients.

In fact, today *The Detroit News* editorialized against the Granholm vetoes and published a U.S. map that showed most states do have lifetime limits. Adding fuel to the political fires surrounding the issue was Granholm's public statement a couple of weeks ago that she supported the 48-month cap. Since then she had equivocated, saying in a letter to Sen. Bill HARDIMAN (R-Grand Rapids) that much depended on the definition of "able bodied." (See "Granholm Describes Her 48-Month Support," 12/05/05)

DeRoche told reporters today that he was disappointed that Granholm had vetoed the welfare reform package to begin with.

"It was disappointing," DeRoche said of the veto. "The Governor vetoed welfare reforms that would have helped people get off welfare. Michigan doesn't need to be known as the most benefit-rich state. Michigan needs to be more business friendly."

Following that opening statement, DeRoche quickly focused on the 48-month issue, saying that he anticipates opening up 2006 with the assumption that Granholm agrees to the concept of the 48-month lifetime limit.

"I presume that she supports the 48-month limit for able-bodied adults," DeRoche said. "She said it a couple of weeks ago."

"I'll leave it to others to discern whether she's taken two positions or not," the Speaker responded when reporters offered up some of Granholm's stated caveats about such a limit.

But House Minority Leader Dianne **BYRUM** (D-Onondaga) said that what was really going on was just Republicans playing politics.

"Democrats also believe that welfare should be a helping hand, not a way of life," Byrum said. "We maintain that at the end of the year they (the GOP) were just setting the Governor up for a veto. We were very close to reaching a resolution. This was a political decision by the Republicans."

Byrum added that, now that the political ploy had played out, the Legislature would move welfare reforms in 2006 that Granholm could sign.

"I'm confident we can do that," Byrum responded when asked if an agreement on the reforms could be reached after the New Year.

MIRS asked Byrum about DeRoche's statement that he was assuming Granholm supports the 48-month limit.

"I think that will be in the mix," Byrum said of the limit. "But just because you take them off welfare, doesn't mean their costs go away. We don't want to shift the burden onto families and children."

Only three members, Reps. John **GARFIELD** (R-Rochester), Bob **GOSSELIN** (R-Troy) and Lorence **WENKE** (R-Richland) voted against **SB 0757**. There were 22 members who weren't present at today's session.

Changes needed on welfare

The Grand Rapids Press

Thursday, December 29, 2005

Gov. Jennifer Granholm was wrong this week to veto a package of welfare reform bills that improved chances of able-bodied people becoming self-reliant. She has an obligation now to fashion a better alternative.

Key provisions of the vetoed legislation included a four-year limit on cash assistance, increased education and training opportunities and tougher sanctions for refusal to work or train. These well-thought out reforms placed an emphasis on working and a state commitment to help.

Encouraging able adults to find work is good policy. Gov. Granholm should work on a compromise that strikes the right balance for the needy and taxpayers.

Current welfare provisions are set to expire on Saturday. The House of Representatives was to meet today to give a one-year extension to protect recipients. There are about 78,000 households or 212,000 recipients on assistance. Ms. Granholm vetoed six of the eight bills in the reform package. She deserves some credit for the small steps taken:

Requiring the state to study the effect of increasing the portion of a recipient's earned income disregarded when determining eligibility and benefit levels.

Modifying various Work First requirements including reassessment of eligibility no later than 24 months after approval. Work First programs help with education, training and other employment-related services.

Modest modifications and studies are safe moves that alone won't help people change their way of life or reduce the welfare roll.

The most controversial of the bills vetoed was the cumulative 48-month fixed time limit in which adults eligible for Work First programs can receive aid. An estimated 28,000 recipients currently exceed the proposed time limit. All but two other states -- Ver-

mont, Maine and the District of Columbia -- have recognized the need to impose a reasonable time frame for those capable of living independently. The Michigan legislation allowed for exceptions and opportunities for benefit extensions. For example, a 12-month extension over the 48-months is possible if labor market conditions or employment barriers exist.

Gov. Granholm was wrong to ignore stiffer penalties for those who won't work or train. The current 30-day suspension of benefits is a weak, ineffective deterrent. The vetoed legislation would have taken benefits for 90 days for the first and second violation and two years for the third. About 1,400 cases are in sanctioned status at any time. This is not an indication of overly strict requirements. Taxpayers should expect those receiving their money to follow rules.

The package also expanded opportunities for the education and training crucial to breaking dependency. Recipients would have been required to enroll in programs for a high school diploma, General Equivalency Diploma (GED), literacy or to learn English. Education and training would have applied toward work requirements for two years instead of one.

There never will be a good time to make fundamental changes to welfare. The task just grows more difficult with time, particularly for those receiving aid for multiple years. Gov. Granholm, having spiked a reasonable plan, has a duty now to lead in shaping a compromise. However, welfare reform can't make everyone comfortable and still be effective. Reform also has to be about more than just ushering people off the rolls but giving them the education, training and support to escape welfare and hardship.

Granholt Signs Legislation Preserving Assistance for Vulnerable Citizens

December 29, 2005

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm today signed legislation that will preserve provisions of the Social Welfare Act that were scheduled to expire on Saturday, December 31. On Tuesday, the Governor urged state lawmakers to extend the sunset as soon as possible after she vetoed legislation that would have penalized families who are trying to work their way out of poverty.

“This law allows the Department of Human Services to avoid needless confusion and expense in providing assistance to Michigan’s most vulnerable citizens in need,” Granholm said. “In addition to helping those in need, the department can also continue enforcing work requirements under the state’s welfare laws.”

Public Act 333 extends provisions of the Social Welfare Act that exempt individuals from participating in the Work First program, including:

- the parent of a child under three months of age;
- a recipient of Supplemental Security Income (SSI);
- an individual who meets one or more of the following: receives Social Security

Disability or medical assistance due to disability or blindness; suffers from a physical or mental impairment; is a spouse who is a full-time caregiver of an individual described above; or, is a parent or caretaker of a child who suffers from a physical or mental impairment under the federal SSI disability standards.

The new law also continues the authority to impose sanctions that terminate benefits if the recipient fails, without good cause, to comply with child support requirements, including establishment of paternity and obtaining child support.

“My administration has put in countless hours working with the Legislature to craft a tough, fair, and compassionate welfare reform package that rewards work, trains people for jobs, and protects our poorest and most vulnerable citizens,” Granholm said. “I remain willing to work with the Legislature to enact legislation that is both firm and compassionate.”

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State looks to protect seniors from abusive caregivers

Sunday, January 3, 2006

By Sharon Emery
Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Fearing everything from physical harm to financial exploitation for the growing number of elderly and disabled people in residential care, Michigan lawmakers are poised to enact strict background checks on all new workers who care for them.

The bills are expected to be an early priority this year as the GOP-controlled Legislature pushes safeguards, backed by Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm, that must be approved by March to put the state in line for \$5 million in federal funding. The money, part of a \$25 million federal program, will pay for the background checks and for training 11,000 Michigan health care workers to recognize abuse and neglect.

Michigan is one of seven states implementing pilot projects in an effort to develop a federal system for protecting the elderly and disabled from abusive caregivers.

State Attorney General Mike Cox, whose office helped draft some of the measures, said in an interview that the potential vulnerability of his own aging parents "opened my eyes to a problem that I might not have seen, at a time when I'm in a position to act."

Cox's office found that 25 percent of residential care facility employees committing crimes against residents since 2002 had criminal records. That prompted an investigation that found that nearly 10 percent of all workers in such facilities in Michigan had criminal backgrounds.

Currently only applicants who have been in the state less than three years must undergo FBI fingerprint checks, according to a House Fiscal Agency analysis of the bills. For everyone else, the check basically involves having applicants' names put through an Internet criminal history program.

Weeding out applicants with theft or fraud convictions is a key focus of the new background checks, since financial exploitation is the fastest-growing crime against the elderly, according to the Attorney General's Office. And people in long-term care are most vulnerable because workers have access to patients' Social Security numbers and other personal information.

"You have everything you need to go out and secure credit cards or phone service or to sell that ID on the street, which is happening frequently these days," Wallace Hart, a spokesman for the attorney general, testified at a committee hearing in November. He said that since most nursing home residents don't access their credit report, they never even know they've been exploited.

Legislation approved Dec. 13 by the Senate requires some 5,000 residential care facilities to obtain fingerprints and conduct criminal background checks of all new employees. There are criminal and civil penalties for facilities that knowingly fail to conduct background checks.

Facilities also must obtain fingerprints of current employees, which would be entered into a database so future criminal convictions could be monitored.

Workers with direct access to some 100,000 elderly or disabled Michigan residents, or to their personal information, would be affected. Facilities include nursing homes, county medical care

facilities, hospices, hospitals that provide short-term nursing home care, homes for the aged and home health agencies.

In addition, prospective employees convicted of felonies would have to wait 15 years after serving their sentence before being eligible for work as caregivers. Those convicted of misdemeanor drug, abuse, neglect, assault, battery or criminal sexual conduct offenses would have to wait 10 years.

The main sponsors of the legislation are Sens. Tony Stamas, R-Midland, and Patricia Birkholz, R-Saugatuck.

Similar legislation, sponsored by Republican Reps. Barb Vander Veen of Allendale and Gary Newell of Saranac, and Democrats Paula Zelenko of Burton and Michael Murphy of Lansing, was approved by the House Dec. 6.

House-Senate differences on conducting annual background checks apparently have been worked out, but a dispute remains over the appeals process for disqualified applicants.

Criminal checks to aid seniors

Tuesday, January 03, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

By Nate Reens and Sharon Emery

GRAND RAPIDS -- When trust and vulnerability misfire, senior citizens are often left penniless -- or dead, in worst-case scenarios -- by the people charged with caring for them.

Authorities and legislators hope putting bite into a law designed to protect the elderly from unscrupulous care providers will curb financial exploitation and physical-harm offenses by requiring strict background checks on residential-care workers.

A package of bills sponsored by Saugatuck Republican Patty Birkholz in the state Senate and Rep. Barb Vander Veen, R-Robinson Township, in the House is expected to gain Gov. Jennifer Granholm's approval early this year.

The legislation mandates pre hiring criminal record checks as well as annual looks into the background of all employees at nursing, adult foster care and other homes for the aged. People with criminal convictions would be barred from employment at such facilities for a minimum of 10 years.

"This is way overdue and, I believe, will go a long way to protect a population of society that is particularly vulnerable and particularly trusting," said Terrence Jungel, the executive director of the Michigan Sheriff's Association. "This group of people is wealthier than seniors have ever been and that, unfortunately, makes them a target.

"Most people who are caregivers do it out of compassion. There's a small group that sees it as an opportunity," Jungel said. "If we can weed out that group, we've done a great thing."

If enacted, the law would cover nearly 11,000 workers in the state's health-care field.

The push to protect Michigan's elderly became a priority last year when Attorney General Mike Cox found 25 percent of residential-care facility employees who committed crimes against residents since 2002 had criminal records.

That prompted an investigation that found that nearly 10 percent of all workers in such facilities in Michigan had criminal backgrounds.

Birkholz authored a bill about five years ago that required pre hire background checks, but did not demand the annual investigations.

Her interest in the topic stems from an Allegan County resident who was duped out of her checking account balance while recovering from surgery.

Birkholz said the health-care worker arrested for the offense had a criminal background. The worker was hired before the checks became mandatory. The Saugatuck senator said her initial legislation did not address workers already hired because she was told it could not be done.

The strengthened proposal is crafted so that there is no grandfather provision.

"You don't want to close the barn door after the animals have gotten out," Birkholz said. "We want to do everything possible to protect our seniors. It's of critical importance."

Weeding out applicants with theft or fraud convictions is a key focus of the new background checks, since swindling savings is the fastest-growing crime against the elderly.

Local care providers say the background checks, an unfunded legislative mandate, is a smart move that may shield older patients from harm. However, they would like more discretion on handling valuable employees who have made a one-time mistake that could disqualify them from continued work.

Bob Perl, executive director of Clark Retirement Community, praises the initiative, although he wishes there was funding for the probes. Clark, which cares for about 500 people, has performed the checks before Birkholz's original law, Perl said.

Sue Lemon, the director of Luther Homes, called the measure an added safety mechanism for the 800 people served in the Grand Rapids area in 2005. Luther employs about 350 workers.

"I don't see it as a hardship," she said. "We've always been assertive in our pre-employment checks and the annual provision will strengthen that."

Michigan's disabled lose under proposed rules

Saturday, December 17, 2005

By James Tuinstra
Special To The Grand Rapids Press

We at Hope Network are proud to provide caring, compassionate and professional services to nearly 8,000 of Michigan's adults affected by developmental, psychiatric or physical disabilities. Our concern is that the residential services we provide in 26 Michigan counties will be compromised significantly or eliminated if new rules proposed by Gov. Granholm's administration take effect.

I'm among the many stakeholders in the assisted-living industry who are frustrated with the process facilitated by the administration to draft proposed costly and unnecessary rules for Adult Foster Care (AFC) and Homes for the Aged (HFA). It has been difficult to not only get information but to also have a voice in the process. For example, the stakeholders were brought in at the 11th hour to react to these fairly comprehensive rules. During a Nov. 30 House Appropriations meeting, a Department of Human Services spokesman was unable to name the authors of the draft.

These onerous regulations would reduce direct services and increase costs for the most-vulnerable citizens. In addition, they would threaten worker- privacy rights and unfairly favor collective bargaining efforts by union organizers.

If adopted, Gov. Granholm's proposed rules would have a detrimental impact on the availability and quality of care of approximately 50,000 AFC and HFA residents in our state. These rules require every licensed setting, regardless of size, to establish health and safety committees to do work already required by law. In Hope Network's case, this means each of our facilities would be required by law to establish health and safety committees. This additional -- and redundant -- requirement would drive up costs statewide by an estimated \$35 million, according to the Coalition for Affordable and Quality Care.

One of our challenges is to provide a caring quality workforce. What these proposed rules do is hinder our efforts to recruit and maintain a quality workforce. For example, the rules require the public reporting of employees' private and confidential information, including Social Security number, address and birthdate. Also made public would be wages, benefit structures, turnover rates, employment records and recruitment and retention information. These requirements conflict with Michigan's identity theft protection laws -- and provide substantial disincentives for individuals wishing to pursue careers in the AFC and HFA homes.

The state already has access to this information when it reviews our staff records during the renewal process. Furthermore, such requirements have no precedent in other states, and are perceived as a first step toward mandatory collective bargaining. Another substantial negative aspect of the rules changes: the preferential treatment given AFC and HFA licensees with collective bargaining agreements and to licensees engaging in multi-employer collective bargaining activities.

Under the proposed rules, these licenses would be deemed automatically compliant with the proposed licensing requirements and the matter of compensation, benefits and staffing rules becomes exempt from scrutiny. It should be noted that there are no other regulated professions or industries in Michigan that defer to union status or collective bargaining to measure compliance with administrative rules. These rules would not enable us to increase wages and benefits to our staff. Most of our funding comes from County Mental Health Agencies, and there is no funding mechanism to reimburse us for these proposed additional administrative requirements.

The rules proposed by the Granholm administration for the AFC industry would drive costs up unnecessarily with no recognizable benefits for residents. Many facilities that endeavor to maintain viability as quality, cost-conscious care-service providers will be forced to a) raise prices to cover the costs of burdensome and redundant administrative requirements, which also divert attention from providing hands-on care to residents, or b) close their doors permanently, leaving less choices for families requiring these services.

The bottom line: These rules do little to enhance the system; instead, they detract from its ability to effectively serve the needs of Michigan's elderly and disabled adults. The focus of licensees should be on the care, not the paperwork. We must work together to fight for those who are unable to fight for themselves. I encourage people to please send a message to Gov. Granholm to halt this rules process.

James Tuinstra is president and CEO of Hope Network in Grand Rapids.

Granholt Proposals to Protect Children Take Effect January 1

LANSING - Governor Jennifer M. Granholm today announced that new laws aimed at protecting children from sexual predators while at school or day care will take effect Sunday, January 1. The new laws, which the Governor called for in a letter to state lawmakers last spring, also strengthen reporting requirements for convicted sex offenders to ensure that the state's Sex Offender Registry is accurate.

"Parents deserve peace of mind knowing that their children are safe, especially when they are away from home," Granholm said. "These new laws are aimed at protecting children from sexual predators while they are riding the bus, playing on the school playground, learning in classrooms, or at day care."

The new laws create "School Safety Zones" that prohibit sex offenders from working or loitering within 1,000 feet of school property.

The new laws require criminal history checks and criminal record checks of persons applying for or renewing a certificate of registration to operate a family day care home or licenses to operate group day care homes, child care centers, or day care centers.

When a person applies for a certificate of registration to operate a family day care home or a license to operate a group day care home, the Department of Human Services must use the Internet Criminal History Access Tool (ICHAT), the Michigan State Police criminal history record database on all persons over the age of 18 residing in the home where the day care is operated.

The laws prevent teachers and other school employees who are convicted sex offenders from returning to the classroom. Schools must perform background checks before hiring new employees or contractors who regularly come into school. The laws also require schools to perform background checks on all current school employees and require school employees to report to schools if they have been convicted of a sex offense. A convicted sex offender may not be employed by a school in any capacity.

In addition, the new laws will allow evidence of prior sex crimes to be considered as character evidence at trial. In a criminal case in which the defendant is accused of committing an offense against a minor, evidence that the defendant committed the previous offense is admissible and may be considered for its bearing on any matter to which it is relevant.

"We must remain diligent until we have taken every possible step to protect our children," said Granholm. "These new restrictions show sex offenders that we mean business, and we will not rest until we do everything we can to keep the 'bad guys' away from our children."

The package also includes new requirements for people already on the state's Sex Offender Registry, including notifying the state immediately upon vacating their current residence and increased penalties for failing to report accurate residency information.

Granholm has been a long-time advocate of child protection issues. As governor, Granholm has worked hard to promote action on the legislation going into effect, as well as a package of bills she signed into law earlier this year limiting children's access to violent and sexually-explicit video games.

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Published December 31, 2005
[From the Lansing State Journal]

New laws aim to shield kids from felons Critics charge measures may harm innocent

By Amy F. Bailey
Associated Press

More than a dozen new laws that go on the books Sunday are intended to better protect children from felons, particularly sex offenders, but a few advocacy groups say they are too strict and could hurt the reputations of innocent educators.

The laws ban registered sex offenders from living, working or loitering within 1,000 feet of a school and require schools and day-care centers to take fingerprints and do background checks on all their employees, including janitors and coaches, by July 2008.

They also require school employees and applicants charged with a crime to report it to the state Department of Education within three business days of their arraignment.

Advertisement

A state audit released last year showed that the state did not routinely check lists of school employees against lists of convicted criminals. It found that 222 licensed school workers had criminal records since the state began mandating background checks for school employees in the 1993-94 school year.

"We need to keep kids safe and the only way to do that is to keep the records on file," said House Speaker Craig De- Roche, R- Novi, who helped guide the bills through the Legislature.

Shelli Weisberg, legislative director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan, said the new laws reflect a national trend aimed at cracking down on sex offenders and other felons.

Potential fallout

The law that creates a 1,000-foot perimeter around schools exempts registered sex offenders who already live or work in the area, but it prohibits them from interacting with children.

The law also allows a court to exempt some young sex offenders from provisions of the law in certain circumstances.

Still, Weisberg is worried about the fallout of the new laws. Michigan has one of the nation's largest sex offender registries that does not distinguish between predators and those who had consensual sex with peers under age 16, she said.

The registry had nearly 38,000 people on it in November.

"You've got people who are not a danger to society being affected because our sex offender registry doesn't do a risk assessment," Weisberg said.

Electronic storage

Teachers and administrators have been required to submit fingerprints and background checks as part of their application for more than a decade, but they will have to get them redone under the new laws so their information can be stored electronically.

Job applicants who have been convicted of a sex crime will not be hired and employees who have a felony conviction revealed by a check will lose their jobs.

The Michigan State Police will monitor the database. It can match fingerprints of people newly arrested to school employees already in the system, which will allow authorities to quickly get that information to school districts.

The state's largest teachers union says it's concerned the state police records could be wrong, said Margaret Trimer-Hartley, spokeswoman for the Michigan Education Association.

"Some people the state police has listed as criminals are the victims of identity theft," Trimer-Hartley said. "We're hopeful the data won't be released in a public way until it is clean."

Updated database

Tim Bolles, manager of the state police's identification and criminal history section, said the new database is an improvement from the old system that collected paper copies of fingerprints, checked the people they belonged to for a criminal record and then discarded them.

"We now will be building an applicant file that stores fingerprints in the system," said Bolles, who said the new database eventually will have information from 250,000 school employees. "In two years, if an employee is arrested, those prints will come back and match one."

The MEA says school districts should cover the cost of fingerprints and background checks for employees, which can cost as much as \$70 a person.

School officials and school board members argue that it's not their responsibility since the state is requiring them for employment.

Expensive process

"We want to make this work for everybody, but if you're a large district this is a huge expense," said Don Wotruba, legislative affairs director for the Michigan Association of School Boards. "It's a bigger expense for a district than an individual. It could be \$70,000, which is difficult when you have to cut that out of a budget."

The MEA and the school groups said the issue likely will be discussed when districts negotiate new contracts.

A few intermediate school districts, including Ingham, have purchased their own equipment to take fingerprints rather than use a vendor.

The Ingham ISD spent about \$12,000 for the new system so schools could quickly get back information about applicants, said Susan Tinney, the district's business office supervisor.

The district charges \$69 for new applicants, but is considering dropping the district's processing fee from \$15 to \$5 for teachers and administrators who are getting their background check and fingerprints redone, Tinney said.

"The idea that we would have the results so quickly was the greatest benefit," Tinney said.

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Educators fall under scrutiny

A package of laws taking effect Sunday are intended to better protect children from felons at school and day care. The laws:

- Ban registered sex offenders from living, working or loitering within 1,000 feet of a school with some exemptions.
- Require schools and day care centers to take fingerprints and do background checks on job applicants and current employees, including part-time workers and contractors, by July 2008.
- Prohibit school districts from employing a registered sex offender.
- Require school employees and applicants charged with a crime to report it to the state Department of Education within three business days of their arraignment.

MIRS

Thursday, December 29, 2005

He Wants Big Eye In Sky For Sex Offenders

During Thursday's short House session, Rep. David LAW (D-Commerce Twp.) introduced legislation that would require convicted sex offenders to wear a Global Positioning System (GPS) around their ankle to track their whereabouts.

HB 5531 would require anyone convicted of a first-or second-degree sex offense against anyone 13 and younger to wear an ankle monitor as a condition of parole.

Law didn't say that wearing an ankle monitor would stop the crimes, but he is hopeful they would create what he calls, "the deterrent factor."

"If sexual predators know they're being followed and they have a desire to abduct a child at that point, my hope is that they would not follow through on it because we would know who did it," Law said.

The monitor system would also keep track of the 9,000 sex offenders who do not register and as a result, evade authorities, Law said. The idea is the monitors would be placed on the person immediately after their conviction so they couldn't avoid being tracked the same way they avoid registration.

And, as soon as an offender tries to take the device off, authorities will be on them, Law said.

"When it gets cut off it tells the monitoring company that the device has been altered and cut off," Law said. "It's a two-year felony so either they wear it or cut it off and we immediately find them."

Law pegged the Department of Corrections (DOC) as the "monitor," but said that if going to a private company would prove to be less expensive, he would look at going that route.

"This is very preliminary," Law said.

This legislation has been in the works since April but came to Law's attention after a little girl in Florida was abducted and murdered by a convicted sex offender.

Florida recently passed similar legislation nicknamed "Jessica's Law" after the little girl that was abducted. Law said mirroring Florida's legislation would work in Michigan because the amount of sex offenders in Michigan and Florida are similar.

The monitoring start up costs would be about \$3.9 million with yearly upkeep costs ranging between \$4 and \$8 million. Sex offenders who can afford to pay for the tracking will pay for the tracking and those who can't will have their tracking paid for by the state.

"For all the different things we spend money on for the state, our children and the safety of our children should be priority number one," Law said. "I'm confident other legislators will look at it."

Law hopes the Judiciary Committee will begin hearings on his legislation by mid-January.

Published December 31, 2005

1-year-old recovering after being hit, tossed into snow

Mom put battered baby in snowbank, police say

By Jack Kresnak
Special to the State Journal

DETROIT - When EMS attendants rushed 1-year-old Da'Lonn Beddell into the emergency room of Children's Hospital of Michigan on Dec. 16, he had been severely beaten, then plunged into a snowbank.

The toddler's lips were blue. There was evidence of a brain injury from a battering. One eye's pupil was bigger than the other, and, with a core body temperature of 89.5 degrees, he was suffering from hypothermia, according to Detroit police and state child abuse investigators.

Da'Lonn was in critical condition, officials said, but the snow may have saved his life.

On Thursday, Da'Lonn's 23-year-old mother, Lacombinike Anderson, waived her preliminary hearing in Detroit's 36th District Court on two counts of first-degree child abuse, each 15-year felonies. Judge Ruth Ann Garrett lowered Anderson's bond from \$80,000 to 10 percent of \$1,500 without objection from Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Lora Weingarden.

The incident began the evening of Dec. 16. According to Detroit police and state Child Protective Services reports, DeShawn Smith, the father of one of Anderson's four children, called 911.

When police arrived at Anderson's home, Da'Lonn was lying unresponsive on a mattress.

He was wearing only a diaper and was "extremely cold to the touch," a police report said.

When questioned by police, Anderson "confessed to striking the child" in the head, then immersing him in snow to stop his crying, the report said.

Da'Lonn's condition has improved to good. He likely will go to a foster home, officials said.

Dr. Marcus DeGraw, medical director of the child protection team at St. John Hospital in Detroit, said the snow immersion may have helped prevent damage to the boy's brain and other organs.

Contact Jack Kresnak of the Detroit Free Press at (313) 223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

Man faces child porn charge

Saturday, December 31, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

ROBINSON TOWNSHIP -- A convicted sex offender who spent 23 years in prison for raping a girl was arraigned Thursday in Grand Haven District Court after child pornography allegedly was found on his home computer, police said. Steven Fessenden, 59, is charged with possessing child pornography and using a computer to commit a felony. Fessenden asked a friend to work on his computer, and that person saw the pornography and called police, said Sgt. Gary Miles of the Michigan State Police Grand Haven post. Fessenden served time for sexually assaulting a child in the 1980s. After serving his sentence, he worked as a mechanic.

Suspect faces sex charge

Friday, December 30, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

ROCKFORD --

A Grand Rapids man accused of trying to develop child pornography at a Sam's Club store was ordered on Thursday to stand trial. Jerred Parris III, 35, waived his preliminary hearing before Rockford District Judge Steven Servaas. He faces charges of engaging in sexually abusive activities and possessing sexually abusive materials. Police were alerted by employees at Sam's Club on Alpine Avenue NW, where he allegedly tried to develop or enlarge photos. Parris was arrested Dec. 6 at his grandmother's house.

West Michigan child homicides in 2005

Sunday, January 01, 2006

Deaths of the innocent

Seven children were among the 25 homicide victims in West Michigan last year. They are:
Janie Nash, 3 months, Belding: Died on March 13. Mother, 22, charged with second-degree murder for allegedly laying her child, who had spina bifida, face-down on pillow, knowing it would kill her.

Alana Friar, 8, Grand Rapids:

Suffocated April 24 in same house where mother is killed. A distant relative is charged.

Leonel Theodore Ortiz, 4, in Allegan County's Lee Township: Shot by mother, 22, who then shoots herself to death July 19.

Aiyana Cisneros, 2, Grand Rapids: Died on July 19. Mother, 20, charged with second-degree murder, though police say she didn't necessarily inflict the injuries.

Armon Colar, 2, in Grand Rapids: Died on Aug. 24 of abuse. Mom's boyfriend, then 17, charged with felony murder.

Luz Maria, unborn child of Silvia Sanchez-Parada and husband, Leoncio Garcia-Lopez, of Grand Rapids: Mother killed Oct. 14, allegedly by knife-wielding man charged with murder and who is first charged in Kent County under new state law for death of a fetus.

Elizabeth Gelineau, 16 months, Ottawa County's Georgetown Township: . Died of head injuries Dec. 11. Homicide. Under investigation.

Fetus listed for first time as homicide

Sunday, January 01, 2006

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- For the first time, an unborn child will be included on the city's year-end list of homicide victims.

But the Oct. 14 death of Luz Maria can't be recognized by the state police or the FBI as a murder, according to state and federal guidelines.

Luz Maria is 18th on the Grand Rapids Police Department's list of homicides, just behind her mother, Silvia Sanchez-Parada, who was stabbed to death in their home at 848 Baxter St. SE. The child was due in January

Edwin Lario Munoz, 19, has been charged with felony murder in the death of the mother and assault on a pregnant person with intent to cause miscarriage or stillbirth in the fetal death.

Under state law, the second charge carries a penalty equal to second-degree murder -- up to life in prison.

However, Michigan State Police computers won't recognize the death as a homicide unless police list the victim as at least one hour old, said Theresa Page, manager of the state police uniform crime reporting unit.

The Grand Rapids case is the first time she has come across the issue, she said.

Under the state's Prenatal Protection Act, in effect since Jan. 1, 1999, anyone who injures or kills a fetus, except for the mother or a doctor performing an abortion at the mother's request, can face severe penalties.

Lario-Munoz was the first charged in Kent County with causing an intentional miscarriage or stillbirth.

Page said the law may require that the state police rewrite its crime-reporting computer program to accept deaths of fetuses -- in which charges are filed -- as homicides.

Even so, the FBI won't include the death as a murder in its annual uniform crime reports, Page said. The FBI's list of deaths that can't be included as murders include traffic fatalities, suicides and fetal deaths.

Tiny victims, huge question: Why did child homicides increase?

Sunday, January 01, 2006

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

They were described as angels. Some hadn't spoken a first word or taken a first step.

One was unborn.

They are West Michigan's youngest victims.

Last year, seven of the 25 homicides in the area took the lives of children age 8 or younger. Six were 4 and under.

One was 3 months old -- a child whose birth defect, spina bifida, was too much for her young mother to handle, according to a confession she later recanted.

Also among them was Luz Maria, a fetus that didn't survive the stabbing death of her mother.

The number of deaths -- from Belding to Grand Rapids to Ottawa County -- is unusual and troubling, say local police, who develop a veneer to cope with shootings and stabbings but often can't handle deaths of children.

"They all look like angels laying on that table," said Grand Rapids Police Capt. Jeffrey Hertel, who has sat in on autopsies of children in the basement of Spectrum Health Blodgett Campus.

"I've seen some of our seasoned investigators having a very difficult time," he said. "They're kids, just extremely innocent victims."

Hertel and others in law enforcement say they can't explain the increase.

There are common threads: Most of the violence is domestic. Six were killed in their own homes.

"You feel very sad, you feel angry," said Kent County Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Stephen Cohle, who performs many autopsies in West Michigan.

"You think, 'Why would somebody do this to a kid?'"

Cohle sits on a panel that meets monthly to review violent and unexplained deaths of children in Kent County.

A national expert says the deaths help reveal failures of Michigan's child welfare system.

State officials say they recently started taking a closer look at child deaths statewide -- creating a panel to study those involving abuse and neglect -- and are taking new steps to help prevent them.

"There's all these theories about why it's happening, why we're seeing more deaths," said Rosalynn Bliss, director of prevention services at the Child and Family Resource Council, a Grand Rapids nonprofit dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect.

"The reality is, more children are dying and we as a community need to come together and address this problem head-on."

The rate of child homicides in West Michigan last year -- 27 percent of the area's slayings -- far exceeds the national average.

In 2004, one of 23 homicide victims in the area was a young child.

Nationally, about 4 percent of all murder victims are age 8 and younger, according to the FBI.

That rate remained steady over the past decade.

More than half of young children are killed by what the FBI calls "personal weapons" -- hands, feet, fists -- or by asphyxiation.

Not safe at home

Each death raises the same question: Who could do such a thing?

In some cases, police say, it's the person closest to the child -- mom.

According to police, at least three of the West Michigan children died at the hands of their mothers, or because of a mother's failure to protect her baby.

The mothers involved were young -- ages 18 to 22.

One child allegedly was killed by a boyfriend, and another by a relative, police said. The fetus allegedly was killed by a man who stabbed to death the unborn child's mother.

In Grand Rapids, four of 19 homicide victims in 2005 were young children, including two 2-year-olds -- Aiyana Cisneros and Armon Colar, both killed last summer.

The previous year, none of the city's 12 victims was a child.

Aiyana's mother, Samantha Winkler, 20, has been charged with second-degree murder, although police say she did not necessarily inflict the injuries. Detectives continue to investigate. Winkler denies the charge.

Aiyana is buried among mostly young children in an area known as "Babyland" in a corner of Grand Rapids' Fairplains Cemetery. The words, "Our Precious Angel," are carved into her headstone.

In Belding, 22-year-old Amy Nash confessed to allowing her 3-month-old girl, Janie, to suffocate face-down in a pillow while her husband was away, police said. She wrote that she "snapt" under the pressure of the baby's medical problems, including spina bifida.

However, Nash told The Press she did not kill her daughter and that she wrote the confession after 45 minutes of police interrogation.

The death totals don't include the Nov. 28 drowning of a 4-year-old Grandville boy, which police continue to investigate.

They also don't include the death of 3-month-old Michael McClure, who was left in a hot car in Oceana County. His 18-year-old mother has been charged with involuntary manslaughter and second-degree child abuse. The case falls outside the immediate Grand Rapids area.

Blaming the state

A national expert said Michigan officials should share some of the blame for not protecting children.

In West Michigan, child-protection workers from Michigan Department of Human Services had been involved with families of at least three of last year's young victims. They had returned Aiyana Cisneros to her mother and boyfriend after other relatives found a bruise near her pelvis. The problem, however, isn't that the state leaves too many children in bad homes, said Richard Wexler, executive director of the nonprofit National Coalition for Child Protection Reform in Alexandria, Va.

It's just the opposite: Michigan takes too many children, leaving overwhelmed child-protection workers without time to identify children in real danger, Wexler said. About 17,000 Michigan children are in foster care.

"So workers make even more bad mistakes in both directions -- and child-abuse fatalities actually increase," Wexler said.

Across Michigan, about 18,000 child-abuse complaints were substantiated by state investigators last year -- a 9 percent jump since 2002.

In Kent County, the rate of confirmed abuse and neglect cases involving children age 5 and younger has nearly doubled since 2001 -- to about 25 per 1,000 children, county records show. That is higher than the state average.

Wexler points to Pittsburgh, Pa., and surrounding Allegheny County, which has drastically cut the number of children in foster care. In that county of more than 1 million people, no child was killed through abuse in the last 18 months, he said.

State officials say they focus on keeping abused and neglected children closer to home.

Also, the state last year created a review board to study cases in which children with a history of involvement with protective services died of abuse or neglect, said Jim Nye, director of field operations for Children's Protective Services.

In August, the board met for the first time, reviewing 10 deaths from 2005. Most of the children were 3 and younger, and many were killed by live-in boyfriends, Nye said.

"We have seen more infants who have been injured as a result of blunt force ... usually by a man that mom has been involved with and has left the child with," Nye said.

"The baby cries ... and the boyfriend is not equipped to deal with the child and reacts violently."

Among lessons learned: many of the children lived in homes where domestic violence had been reported, perhaps between mom and boyfriend, Nye said.

Starting this year, protective services workers will be required to investigate a child abuse complaint whenever there's a history of domestic violence in the home, Nye said.

About half of all child-abuse complaints are investigated in Michigan.

"We certainly are alarmed at any child death," Nye said. "We want to do anything we can to make sure an incident is not replicated."

Our View: Watch what your kids are playing

Midland Daily News

01/02/2006

A recent article in the Daily News reported that regulating violent and sexually explicit video games has been a difficult task for both lawmakers and game sellers.

Lately, there has been a national trend for states to consider banning the sale of games rated teen and mature to minors, but any law that passes has been challenged in court.

A Michigan law that had been set to go into effect on Dec. 1 would have made it a crime for retailers to sell "sexually explicit" or "ultraviolent" video games to minors. In November, a temporary injunction blocked the state from enforcing the law.

A similar California law met the same fate earlier this month. Judges are finding that the laws could violate game makers' constitutional rights to free speech.

We believe that lawmakers are taking upon themselves responsibilities that ideally belong to parents. Laws are not the solution -- attentive parents are. But, statistics say parents are not doing their jobs.

A 2005 study of more than 2,000 8- to 18-year-olds by Roberts, Foehner, and Rideout found that only 21 percent said their parents set rules about which video games they can play. Less than one in five parents checks warning labels or ratings on video games.

The good news is the same study said only 12 percent play video games they know their parents don't want them playing.

Some kids inevitably will sneak around to play explicit games. Laws won't change that, but most will listen to their parents when they forbid certain games.

We encourage parents to pay attention. Parents should occasionally peek over their child's shoulder when he or she is at the PC or PlayStation. They should read video game boxes to make sure the rating is appropriate.

Lawmakers cannot visit every living room or teenager's bedroom, so the policing job has to fall on the parents.

Service in military can't alter custody

New law is based on soldier's case

December 30, 2005

BY KATHLEEN GRAY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Joe McNeilly knows that a bill signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm this week won't help him in a custody fight he's having with an ex-girlfriend.

But he's hoping it will prevent other soldiers from going through the agony he did when he returned from Iraq in March.

The new law prohibits courts from changing custody orders or a child's placement while a parent is on active military duty unless there is convincing evidence that such a change is in the best interests of the child.

The bill was passed unanimously last month by the state House and Senate after legislators heard McNeilly's story.

When the Michigan National Guard specialist returned from Iraq earlier this year, he found that things had changed during his 15-month tour of duty.

In an emergency hearing during a two-week leave from Iraq, McNeilly's custody of his 10-year-old son Joey was dramatically changed by the Ingham County Friend of the Court. He had agreed to give temporary custody to his ex-girlfriend, Holly Erb of Mason, while he was serving overseas, but discovered that the arrangement had changed.

Instead of a 50-50 split of time with their son, McNeilly now gets to see his son only every other weekend.

"I lost my rights because I went to serve," he said.

"I'm not settling for anything less than what I had before I left. We knew the bill wouldn't affect my situation," said McNeilly, 33, of Grand Ledge. "But we don't want any more kids to be put in the middle and have to go through this stuff."

While McNeilly said his service overseas was the primary reason he lost custody, Erb, who is the boy's mother, and her lawyer said in court proceedings that they were more concerned about his parenting skills.

The State Bar of Michigan opposed the bill, saying it put the interests of the parent ahead of the interests of the child. But the Legislature sided with McNeilly.

Major Dawn Dancer of the Michigan National Guard said she's glad the bill is now law.

"Anything that is going to help take the stress and worry off our soldiers while they're serving is important," she said Thursday. "If soldiers' families aren't taken care of, they can't focus on the mission in front of them."

Contact **KATHLEEN GRAY** at 313-223-4407 or gray@freepress.com.

As New Drug Plan Begins, Stores Predict Bumps

By ROBERT PEAR and MILT FREUDENHEIM
The New York Times

Published: January 1, 2006

WASHINGTON, Dec. 31 - Millions of older Americans will gain access to government-subsidized prescription drugs on Sunday with the long-awaited expansion of Medicare. But pharmacists say beneficiaries may initially experience delays and frustration as the promise of the new program is translated into practice.

Tens of thousands of people who signed up for the benefit have yet to receive the plastic identification cards that will enable them to fill prescriptions promptly at retail drugstores. More than five million poor people have been assigned to Medicare drug plans selected at random by the federal government. In an unknown but small number of cases, people were inadvertently assigned to plans far from their homes, because the government used addresses for relatives or guardians.

Bush administration officials have made exhaustive efforts to identify low-income people entitled to the drug benefit. But they say it is possible that some will show up at pharmacies before they have been enrolled in any plan.

Leslie V. Norwalk, deputy administrator of the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said her agency had "an extra safety net" for these beneficiaries. They can "leave the pharmacy with a prescription in hand," she said, if pharmacists follow a contingency plan devised by the government.

In addition, insurers said that some people happily receiving care in health maintenance organizations, under contract to Medicare, had signed up for free-standing prescription drug plans, not realizing that they would be automatically ejected from their H.M.O.'s. They now face higher costs for hospital care and doctor's visits in the traditional Medicare program.

Medicare drug coverage, the biggest expansion of the program in its 40-year history, will be offered through private insurance plans subsidized by the government, at a federal cost estimated

system, to verify eligibility, it appears that 30 percent of my low-income patients have fallen through the cracks. Some of those patients are at risk of not getting medications."

Garrison C. Moreland, a co-owner of the Moreland & Devitt Pharmacy in rural Rushville, Ill., said, "The first few weeks will be chaotic." His store, he said, will have to change its billing procedures for many customers, and doctors will have to rewrite prescriptions to comply with Medicare drug plan formularies.

The new drug coverage is available to all 42 million Medicare beneficiaries, regardless of their incomes. The government reported on Dec. 22 that more than 1 million people had voluntarily signed up, while 10.6 million had been automatically enrolled by federal officials or by Medicare managed care plans.

People have until May 15 to sign up. After that, they may face penalties in the form of higher premiums.

Opinion polls provide a mixed picture of public sentiment. In a survey conducted in late October by the Kaiser Family Foundation, only 35 percent of people 65 and older said they understood the new drug benefit. Those who did understand it were much more likely to view it favorably. A Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll in early December found that 40 percent of older voters had unfavorable views of the new benefit.

The new program depends heavily on a vast network of electronic communications linking Medicare, pharmacies, insurers and other government contractors.

To enroll a person in the new Medicare program, an insurer must submit an electronic file with the person's name, date of birth, sex and other identifying information. If any of the information is inaccurate or missing, or if the format is not exactly right, the file may be rejected.

In most cases, the government tells insurers to correct the errors and resubmit the applications. But in recent weeks, Medicare has often sent back a message saying simply "processing delayed" because of unspecified problems in a computer system. In a bulletin to insurers, the government said it was "researching the cause of this situation." accepted" and "enrollment rejected" at the saying "enrollment same time.

In some cases, insurers have received two contradictory messages for the same beneficiary,

S. Lawrence Kocot, a senior policy adviser at the Medicare agency, said the Bush administration had taken many steps to ensure a smooth transition. On Thursday, the administration disseminated "quick tips" for Medicare beneficiaries. On Friday, it offered guidance to pharmacists, telling them how to deal with two dozen questions and problems that could arise at the pharmacy counter.

Mr. Kocot said, "We know that many beneficiaries may not have their plan identification card on Jan. 1."

To ease this burden, Mr. Kocot said in an e-mail message to pharmacists, "we have implored all plans" to send acknowledgment letters to people who apply for Medicare drug coverage.

Druggists, he said, should fill prescriptions for anyone with such a letter.

A typical letter used by AARP, the lobby for older Americans, thanks the recipient for enrolling in AARP's drug plan, insured by UnitedHealth Group. But it says that the recipient's application has yet to be approved by the federal government. In the meantime, it says: "This letter is proof of your AARP MedicareRx plan coverage. You should show this letter at the pharmacy until you get your member ID card from us."

The letter then cautions that if the government rejects the application, the "AARP MedicareRx plan will bill you for any prescriptions you received through us."

Such letters can be helpful. But Steven A. Hitov, a lawyer at the National Health Law Program, a nonprofit law firm for low-income people, said mail delivery was notoriously spotty in some poor neighborhoods. "Mailboxes are more likely to be broken," Mr. Hitov said, "and mail is more likely to be lost or stolen."

Insurance companies are eager to smooth the way for applicants while they wait for Medicare approvals. Aetna, for example, has arranged temporary drug plan ID cards that can be downloaded and printed from a Web site. Cigna is offering to tell members by telephone how to identify themselves at the pharmacy. WellPoint is keeping its call-in centers open around the clock.

Under the 2003 Medicare law, beneficiaries with low incomes qualify for extra help that can sharply reduce their premiums, deductibles and co-payments. But until Medicare approves an application, the insurer does not know the amount of the subsidy for any particular beneficiary. The drug benefit may increase business for some pharmacies by making medications available to people who could not afford them in the past. But John M. Rector, a senior vice president of the National Community Pharmacists Association, said, "It won't be a moneymaker for the typical pharmacy, because insurers have set extremely low reimbursement levels."

Anxiety about the new drug benefit is remarkably similar to concerns expressed around the beginning of Medicare, on July 1, 1966.

"Social Security offices around the country are being swamped with questions" about Medicare, said an article on the front page of The New York Times on that day. Some people who enrolled "are worried because they have not yet received their Medicare cards," the article said. A top Medicare official said that "many doctors and hospital administrators, as well as patients, do not understand the program."

Then, as now, Medicare was a huge political issue. President Lyndon B. Johnson predicted a smooth beginning for the program, a cornerstone of his Great Society. But a committee of top Republicans from the federal government and the states said he had "failed tragically" to prepare for the start of Medicare.

The first major test of the new drug benefit involves low-income people entitled to both Medicare and Medicaid. They will lose Medicaid coverage of their prescription drugs on Sunday. The Bush administration has made elaborate plans to ensure that Medicare will immediately start paying for their medicines.

Kathryn J. Cole, 36, of Seattle is on Medicare because of disabilities related to a pituitary tumor and has been receiving drug coverage through Medicaid. She said she lived on Social Security checks of \$757 a month. "Currently," she said, "Medicaid pays 100 percent of my drug costs."

Under Medicare, she will have co-payments up to \$3 a month for each of her 15 prescriptions. "That's a large chunk of money for me," Ms. Cole said. "But it's not just the money. The new program is overwhelming because it's so complicated and stressful."

Despite the complexity, insurers report keen interest in the new drug coverage. Karen Wintringham, vice president of Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield in Rochester, N. Y., said beneficiaries would inevitably experience some problems in the first weeks or months.

"It won't run smoothly anywhere in the country for a little while," Ms. Wintringham said, "but it's still better than what many people had before."

Start of Medicare Drug Plan Sees Successes and Struggles

By ROBERT PEAR
The New York Times

Published: January 3, 2006

WASHINGTON, Jan. 2 - Some Medicare beneficiaries were pleasantly surprised and saved money, but others were frustrated this week as the prescription drug benefit got off to an uneven start across the country.

People who applied early and had identification cards in hand were often able to fill prescriptions through the new program, the most significant expansion of Medicare since its creation 40 years ago. But others were stymied in their efforts to take advantage of the drug benefit, as pharmacists spent hours trying to confirm eligibility and enrollment by telephone and computer.

Shortly after 10 a.m. on Sunday, Margaret A. Riney, 76, of Cincinnati, walked into a Walgreens store two blocks from her home to fill prescriptions for a thyroid ailment and an eye infection. She handed over her insurance card for the Medicare drug plan, which took effect on Sunday, and the pharmacist promptly found her name among the approved beneficiaries.

Within 10 minutes, Ms. Riney had her medications, having paid \$3 for the eye prescription and \$8.40 for the thyroid drug. Under her previous coverage, she often had to pay \$96 for the same thyroid prescription and as much as \$20 for the eye medication.

"I feel pretty good about things today," Ms. Riney said. "I just hope, as I need more medications, that it's this easy. I thought about not signing up for the plan because it was so confusing, but I was paying way too much for my pills. I think I did the right thing."

In Brooklyn, Seth Kaplan, a 36-year-old disabled Medicare recipient, reported a very different experience. He said he had struggled unsuccessfully to get his drug plan to pay for his asthma medication. He said that he and his pharmacist had spent two hours on the phone with the insurer, WellCare, and that he eventually had to pay for the drug with his credit card, at a cost of \$191.

"At first, on the phone, they claimed it took Medicare two weeks to confirm my eligibility," Mr. Kaplan said. "Then they said one computer system said I was enrolled and another said I had not applied. Then they said I should pay for the prescription and wait to be reimbursed. I said I couldn't afford to do that."

Without discussing a specific case, Heath Schiesser, president of WellCare's drug plan business, said, "We successfully filled thousands of prescriptions on Jan. 1 for Medicare beneficiaries across the country," with few problems.

Tony P. Welder, owner of the Dakota Pharmacy in Bismarck, N.D., said he was snarled in the electronic equivalent of red tape on Monday. "We have had difficulty processing claims for Medicare drug benefits," he said. "We will get through it, but at the moment, it's an awful mess and very frustrating for our patients."

Mr. Welder said "people are in a panic" trying to cope with Medicare drug plans. "Perhaps," he said, "we should give out cellphone numbers for members of Congress so that our patients can call them for help."

Kas Ghayal, a pharmacist at a Wal-Mart store in Melbourne, Fla., said the program appeared to be going fairly well. "The only problem is that the Medicare computer system is inundated," Mr. Ghayal said. "So when we check eligibility, it sends back busy signals or says, 'Try again.' That interferes with care for the patient."

Mr. Ghayal, a former president of the Brevard County Pharmacy Association, said he filled 20 prescriptions for people using the Medicare drug benefit in two and a half hours on Monday. But, he said, in that same time, he was thwarted in his effort to check eligibility for 40 to 45 beneficiaries who wanted to refill prescriptions.

The eligibility database is maintained by a Medicare contractor, NDCHealth. A spokesman for the company, Robert P. Borchert, said Monday: "We experienced slow response times because of the heavy volume of calls early today. Throughout the day, we've been making adjustments to deliver faster responses to pharmacies."

Dr. Mark B. McClellan, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said he was pleased with the first days' experience. "Many thousands of people were able to get their prescriptions filled," he said.

But because of "a big surge in enrollment at the end of December," Dr. McClellan said, some beneficiaries have not received identification cards or acknowledgment letters from the drug plans to which they applied.

When asked about his experience with the new benefit, Emmanuel C. Obi, a pharmacist at an independent drugstore in El Paso, said: "That's a big joke. All the phone lines are jammed with calls. We can't get any answers from Medicare or the prescription drug plans."

When a Medicare patient shows up without proof of drug coverage, pharmacists can call various insurance companies for assistance. Mr. Obi and other pharmacists reported waits of 30 to 60 minutes on such calls.

Ronald J. Chase, pharmacy manager of Miller Drug in Bangor, Me., one of the state's busiest pharmacies, said he had virtually given up on Medicare's computer system and tried instead to call insurers directly. But he said: "The lines are overwhelmed and bogged down. We feel we've been handcuffed. So we give customers a three-day supply until we figure out who's in what plan."

A Medicare drug plan typically has a list of covered drugs, known as a formulary. Under Medicare rules, each plan is supposed to have a transition policy, providing a "one-time fill" of any prescription excluded from the formulary, so doctors can prescribe another drug or challenge the denial of coverage.

But Mr. Chase, the Bangor pharmacist, said insurers were generally unaware of the federal requirement.

The Bush administration says it sent letters to low-income Medicare beneficiaries, informing them of the drug plans to which they had been assigned by the government. But Mr. Obi, the Texas pharmacist, said, "Some of my customers can't read English, and I cannot get through to Medicare to find out what plans they're in."

Albert Salvato contributed reporting from Cincinnati for this article.

The prescription puzzle

Monday, January 02, 2006

By Ingrid Langsather
For the Citizen Patriot

After two months of sorting through pages of information, attending meetings and making phone calls, Eileen Rawlins finally enrolled in a new Medicare prescription plan Tuesday.

It was a decision the Jackson woman said she couldn't have made on her own.

With the help of volunteers from Jackson's Medicare-Medicaid Assistance Program, she was able to sift through the information and pick a plan that should work for her.

"I wouldn't have known what to do," she said. "There are so many different prices and premiums. It's really terrible."

Rawlins is among the thousands of Jackson-area senior citizens who have been wading through information since Nov. 15, when enrollment got under way for Medicare's drug plans.

"The sheer volume of plans intimidates anybody," said Lisa Rudolph, coordinator for the MMAP. "I think seniors have been very confused and frustrated."

The new drug plans, called Medicare Part D, are being offered through private insurance companies. Forty plans, which can vary widely in costs, drugs covered and pharmacies where they're accepted, are available in Michigan and beneficiaries must choose one. Premiums will average \$25 a month, but range from less than \$13 to more than \$65.

Rudolph said the volunteers work with seniors to choose plans and can even sign them up online. She said she helps individuals find the plan that best meets their needs for the lowest price based on their current medicines.

In November, Rudolph said the assistance program received 150 calls and visits and in December the number has risen to around 200. Since volunteers only work part-time, calls are returned within one or two business days, she said.

According to Medicare.gov, the official Medicare Web site, benefits of the new prescription drug coverage are available to all people with Medicare, regardless of income, health status, or how prescription drugs are currently covered. Even if seniors don't use many prescription drugs now, they should still consider joining a plan, the Web site states.

Medicare.gov offers a prescription drug plan finder, but not everyone finds it helpful, Rudolph said. The Internet tool, which allows people to compare prescription drug plans and to immediately enroll, is not "user-friendly" for the ones who need it most, she said.

"Seventy-five percent of seniors over 65 are not comfortable using the Internet," Rudolph said.

As an alternative, Rudolph recommends calling a Medicare agent at (800) 633-4227 for information or to enroll on the phone. She said it is essential, however, that people who enroll stay on the phone until they receive a confirmation number.

Lois Hartzog of Concord said she hasn't signed up for a plan yet but intends to do so soon.

"It is very confusing, to say the least, for most people," she said.

After attending a seminar offered by the assistance program, Hartzog said she felt much more prepared.

Local pharmacies are also educating customers -- without encouraging individuals to choose specific plans. Some drugstores will allow insurance agents to enroll people on the spot.

Jonesville Wal-Mart pharmacist Dave Schaefer said the pharmacy has brought in a sales representative from a local health insurance provider to sign up Medicare beneficiaries. Now that Christmas is over, Schaefer said, he has noticed a spike in questions about plans as people have more time to consider what they want to do. Calls for help are common. CVS pharmacy has brought in Medicare experts in addition to well-trained pharmacists to offer aid in choosing plans.

"It is very complicated overall," said Brett Cuper, CVS regional health manager and pharmacy supervisor for southeast Michigan.

Cuper said CVS' pharmacists have been certified to talk to customers about the new drug plans. Most stores, including one in Jackson, provide a Medicare expert to answer customers' questions at least one day a week, he said.

Although the government is encouraging all Medicare beneficiaries to choose a plan, Mohammad Zanooud, a pharmacist at the Jackson Walgreens, 1314 N. West Ave., said he does not think the plans are for everyone.

"People need to look at how much they spend out of pocket," he said. "If you only have one or two prescriptions, it's not worth signing."

Druggists wary as new Medicare plan begins

Friday, January 1, 2006

The Kalamazoo Gazette

January 1, 2006

Laura Strehlow will probably take a deep breath and plunge right in to fill prescriptions when the Borgess Outpatient Pharmacy opens Tuesday morning.

Although she has been preparing for several months to deal with issues related to the new Medicare drug benefit plan that takes effect today, the pharmacist says she still expects patients will have many questions and concerns.

"I think things will get worked out, but there will probably be delays," she said. "People probably won't be getting their prescriptions quite as fast as they are used to."

Because of the holiday and the fact that many pharmacies will have shortened hours or will be closed on Monday, Tuesday is apt to be the day when the reality of this new benefit starts to hit home.

Local pharmacists, who will be on the front lines in dealing with likely glitches in the system, say they have prepared as well as they can for the changes in coverage.

They have attended seminars, undergone training sessions and spent time reading over the complicated rules and regulations of the new Medicare Plan D.

In addition, they have installed special software programs on their computers in order to, among other things, contact the various plans to determine costs and eligibility. This is the same process they already use in working with other health-insurance providers.

Even with all of this preparation, some pharmacists are anxious.

"I think there will be a lot of trouble. It will be very confusing," said Michelle Phelps, a pharmacist at Portage Pharmacy, 1256 E. Centre Ave.

"I'm telling people to do their homework. If you haven't signed up yet, don't panic. You do have until May 15 to sign up."

New ID cards needed

One problem that pharmacists say they are apt to face will be trying to help people who have signed up with one of the Medicare plans but do not yet have their identification cards.

The cards are supposed to arrive in the mail within three to five weeks after a person signs up, said Peggy Sattler, a program coordinator for Kalamazoo County's Area Agency on Aging. But before the cards come, she said, a person should receive a confirmation letter in the mail within one week.

If you take that letter with you to the pharmacy, it should give the pharmacist enough information to fill the prescription.

But, Sattler said, "some people are still signing up and will be signing up over the weekend, and they won't even have a letter yet."

Sattler advises those people to call the plan they have signed up with to get enough information to take to the pharmacy. They should also provide the pharmacy with their overall Medicare coverage identification number, she said.

While there is much yet to be worked out about Medicare Plan D, most Medicare recipients are not expected to use the new benefit in the first days that the benefit takes effect.

Not everyone gets their prescriptions at the start of the month, while some retirees will continue to rely on employer-sponsored plans.

In fact, many seniors have not yet signed up for a Medicare-sanctioned plan.

"Some people are waiting to see how it shakes out," Sattler said.

Drug chains prepared

As the new year has approached, chain drugstores also have been preparing for the formal rollout of the program.

"Ever since this summer, we have been communicating with our pharmacies and the need to share information," said Tiffani Bruce, a spokeswoman for Walgreens in the company's Deerfield, Ill., office.

One of the services that Walgreens offers, she said, is the option of providing customers with computer printouts that compare the drugs they need with the prices that the various plans charge for those drugs.

"That is a good option for people not comfortable" with trying to determine which plan to join on their own, Bruce said.

She said that Walgreens will not turn away someone who doesn't yet have an ID number or confirmation letter.

"As always, when there is an emergency need, we will provide a few days' supply" until the plan itself kicks in, she said.

Medicaid changes big

The beneficiaries likely to face the greatest change are those who currently have their prescriptions covered by the federal-state Medicaid program.

Until now, a Cox News Service article reported, most of their prescriptions have been provided at no cost to those beneficiaries.

Their new coverage will come through a Medicare drug plan and they will be required to make a co-payment -- usually \$2 -- for each drug. Individual pharmacies may waive the co-payment, but they cannot advertise that fact.

For the most part, the new drug benefit is apt to help lower-income people the most, said Strehlow at the Borgess pharmacy.

But even for those in higher-income brackets, she is suggesting that they sign up, since providing drug coverage for all of the nation's seniors is important.

Only time will tell, she said, if all of the red tape will be worth it. "Unfortunately, Medicare Plan D is not as straightforward as many of us on this end would like it to be," she said.

Medicare drug plans overwhelming seniors Questions, fear stopping many from signing up

The Saginaw News

From staff and wire reports

Delores Campbell of Kimball Township should have been thrilled. She finally registered for a Medicare plan after spending weeks trying to find which plan best benefited her situation.

Unfortunately, the new plan is going to cost her an extra \$83 a month.

"I'm just wondering how we're going to pay for it all," she said.

On Sunday, millions of senior citizens became eligible for the new Medicare prescription drug benefit, also known as Medicare Part D, but few have signed up.

Many don't know whether it will save them money, or which private insurance plan they should choose among the dozens that have hit their mailboxes with ads in recent months. Many don't know how to apply or whether they are eligible. And many are asking: Will the medications I need be covered?

The clock is ticking. Those who fail to sign up by May 15 may not be eligible again until 2007.

Volunteers helped Campbell, 75, and her husband Archey, 70, enroll in plans Thursday afternoon at the Port Huron Senior Center.

With 78 plans to choose from, people still have lots of questions, said Laura Newsome, executive director of the St. Clair County Council on Aging.

Federal and local health officials and insurance companies have tried to provide workshops on the new program.

More than 300 people scheduled appointments for the Council on Aging's mass registration Saturday in Port Huron. Only those with appointments will be assisted. Another 100 people are on a waiting list for future registrations.

"There is a lot of confusion around this simply because of the choices," Newsome said. "It's rather overwhelming."

Not surprisingly, the people who seem to know the most tend to be the more educated and more affluent - the ones least likely to need the new coverage.

While the poorest senior citizens, those who receive Medicaid automatically will be enrolled in the program, more than 7 million other low-income elderly people also are eligible for subsidies for their prescription drugs - but only if they pick a plan and sign up separately for the subsidies. As of mid-December, fewer than 1 million people in this group had been approved for the subsidies. It was unclear how many had picked a plan.

That may be because many people still have unanswered questions, said Ken Dubay, pharmacy supervisor for 25 Walgreens stores in eastern Michigan.

"Not every (plan) is going to cover what they're looking for," he said. Pharmacists can be a big help, he said.

At Walgreens, the staff can print a personalized report comparing which of a person's prescription drugs are covered under several plans.

Customers can take the report home and compare co-insurance, premiums, co-pays and deductible options.

People, however, haven't been beating down the doors of Walgreens in Fort Gratiot. Pharmacy and Manager Kurt Kromroy is beginning to wonder if some people are going to register at all.

"I see a lot of them not signing up," he said.

The government has touted its Web site, where senior citizens can compare plans on spreadsheets, and it has urged people to consult their families and their doctors. Senior citizens may set up registration appointments with local Council on Aging resource advocates, Newsome said.

Families registered many residents at Tomlinson Adult Care Home in Grant Township. Most of the residents, who are 80 and older, are registered, owner Dale Tomlinson said. That still leaves Tomlinson, 65, to register for one of the plans. He's hoping to find what works best for him. "I hope so," he said. "I won't have no choice."

Contributing to this Associated Press story was Times Herald reporter Molly Montag.

Originally published January 3, 2006

Medicare changes confuse

Friday, December 30, 2005

SCOTT DAVIS
THE SAGINAW NEWS

Helen Albers spends hundreds of dollars each month on heart and blood pressure medication, but she may have to add extra-strength pain reliever to the list.

For weeks, the 93-year-old Saginaw Township resident has looked over the plans available under new Medicare prescription coverage -- even attending a workshop on the matter -- and it's becoming one big headache.

"I haven't really made a decision," she sighed. "It's really confusing."

Time is running out for Albers and for millions of other seniors.

The U.S. government is launching its new Medicare coverage Sunday -- the first new American entitlement in decades. Seniors have until May 15 to sign up for a plan, and if they fail to do so, they may not have coverage until 2007.

For weeks, state and county officials have conducted workshops and distributed literature to answer questions about the new coverage -- called Medicare Part D -- but many seniors say they remain unclear on details.

In Michigan, seniors have more than 35 plans from which to choose, and many still don't know which will save money or cover their medications.

"It's extremely confusing," said Gerry M. Walko, manager of Wescourt Retirement community in Saginaw Township. "We had a hard time finding someone to even come in to talk about it."

Pharmacists say there's no question that millions of seniors who now pay for their own medications -- such as Albers -- will benefit under the new effort.

"For people who are on multiple medications, it's going to save some people thousands of dollars over the course of a year," said Laurie A. Snellenberger, pharmacy manager for the Healthway Compounding Pharmacy, 1008 N. Saginaw in St. Charles. "These are the people who need the help."

But the rub is that private insurers are offering their own plans -- piggybacking on the new entitlement. Premiums in Michigan range from \$13 to \$66, making a choice difficult for seniors, pharmacists say.

"How they made it confusing is that they allowed too many companies to stick their hands into it," said Kevin E. Wenzel, chief pharmacist at Faler Drug, 1806 Court. "They should have just picked up a handful and let people decide from five to six plans, rather than 35 or 40."

The new Medicare coverage -- after premiums -- generally will pay 75 percent of a senior's drug coverage up to \$2,250 annually. Between \$2,250 and \$3,600, seniors must pay 100 percent of the costs.

Catastrophic coverage kicks in after seniors reach \$3,600; at that point, Medicare pays 95 percent of the costs. Company plans with higher premiums generally will offer enhanced benefits.

More than 40 million seniors are eligible for the drug benefit, but as of mid-December, half had enrolled. In most cases, the senior's previous benefit plans, such as Medicaid, had switched them automatically.

Snellenberger said she has fielded about five to 10 calls a day from confused seniors asking questions.

"I've spent hours with them," said Snellenberger, adding she can discuss the pros and cons of each plan but can't recommend one over another.

Last fall, Wenzel said, Medicare officials tried to address mass confusion by mailing a large booklet to millions of seniors, but he said the unwieldy document likely did not help.

"It's almost like a Bible," Wenzel said. "This book made it worse."

If seniors are experiencing consternation as they wade through the new plans, pharmacists say they are preparing for their own headache.

Monday, they face dealing with dozens of new insurance cards and potentially hundreds of questions each day about which medications are covered.

Wenzel is keeping his fingers crossed for a smooth transition.

"We deal with insurance companies every day," he said. "We'll probably be on the phone setting it up. It's part of our job."

Scott Davis is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9665.

Seeking Doctors' Advice in Adoptions From Afar

By JANE GROSS
The New York Times

Published: January 3, 2006

MINNEAPOLIS - Dmitry, a 15-month-old Russian orphan, grins playfully in the photograph on Dr. Dana Johnson's desk here at the International Adoption Clinic at the University of Minnesota. It is an appealing image but useless for the task at hand. Dr. Johnson is looking for the telltale features of fetal alcohol syndrome. For that, he needs a photo of Dmitry, expressionless, looking directly into the camera.

Dr. Johnson, a pioneer in the growing field of adoption medicine, is trying to assess the health and well-being of Dmitry for a family considering adopting him. Given the increasing understanding among adoption experts of the health risks facing orphans in certain developing countries, scanning a photo of a child has become a common practice, more reliable for finding abnormalities like fetal alcohol syndrome, which smooths the groove between mouth and nose, than for detecting imperceptible risks, like attention deficit disorder.

Those are generally hidden in the incomplete or incomprehensible medical records sent from orphanages. Dmitry's file is a litany of indiscriminate labels like "pyramidal insufficiency" - a red flag for cerebral palsy - that Russian doctors put on all infants born prematurely to impoverished mothers, Dr. Johnson said. Equally useless is Dmitry's hepatitis B test, administered too early to be of value.

Dr. Johnson will request more information. But even if Dmitry proves to be perfectly healthy on paper, Dr. Johnson will alert the prospective parents that most institutionalized children are marked by their early deprivation, some in minor and transitory ways and others with medical and developmental disabilities that will last a lifetime.

Maybe that warning will cost Dmitry a home. Maybe the family will ignore it because they yearn for a child. The best result, Dr. Johnson said, is that they will go forward better prepared for whatever challenges lie ahead.

"Any child does best in a situation where the family's expectations and the child's abilities are in sync," he said. "A child with low potential in an environment with high expectations is a recipe for disaster."

Since Dr. Johnson's clinic opened in 1986, the first of its kind in the nation, 200 doctors have swelled the ranks of adoption experts. Their specialty has been recognized by the American Academy of Pediatrics, and their clinics are fixtures at Ivy League medical centers.

In the same 20-year period, the number of international adoptions has tripled, to 20,000 a year. And a proliferating body of research has documented the effects of deprivation and the wide range of outcomes, from the happily-ever-after narratives typical in adoptions of Chinese girls to the rare accounts of child abuse largely involving boys adopted from Eastern Europe.

At Dr. Johnson's clinic here, some 2,000 children were assessed before adoption in 2005, using medical records, photos and videos. Also in 2005, 500 children were evaluated in person after adoption, and 100 of those received additional mental health services.

For adoption specialists this is a demanding time of year.

The children must be painstakingly taught to rely on their American parents after the blur of interchangeable caretakers in an orphanage. That is especially difficult when children arrive in the holiday season to a houseful of relatives all eager to fuss over a new baby.

In the days before Christmas, each clinic visit ended with a warning to be tough with cooing grandparents, clucking aunts and uncles, and boisterous cousins. Take Jane and Tom Raya, just home from China with 11-month-old Ivy Lee. Dr. Johnson and others on the clinic staff told Mrs. Raya that only she and her husband should feed, bathe or comfort the infant for the first few months.

Relatives should be restrained from bringing gifts, they said, and should ask for permission before picking up the baby.

"You and Tom must be the gatekeepers of all good things that come into her life for a while," said Kay Dole, the clinic's occupational therapist. "That is how you build a firm, trusting relationship."

Unlike adoptions from the American foster care system, which are tightly regulated, international adoption remains a free-for-all. Established agencies prepare families for the risks and urge them to seek adoption screening. But unlicensed "facilitators" abound, matching unsuspecting parents with sickly children.

Compounding the inconsistent preparation are an array of vigorous marketing techniques used to find homes for children who are older or in ill health. They include photo listings on the Internet and programs that place children briefly with host families, for summer vacations or the holidays. Both can promote impulsive decisions, and experts worry that they may cloud the judgment of adoptive families who fall in love first and ask questions later.

An unprepared family can be blindsided when its adopted child has delayed language and motor development, difficulty forming attachments and behavior that mimics attention deficit disorder or autism, all typical when children leave institutions for permanent homes.

Most children catch up, bond with their new families and settle down after they receive enough nourishment, stimulation and attention. But one in five are fundamentally scarred and never fully recover, according to several recent studies.

The critical variables, researchers have found, are the length of time a child is institutionalized and the conditions in the institution. Some studies suggest that families cope better with medical problems than behavioral ones and that it is unwise to adopt more than one child at a time, unless they are siblings.

Marc and Naomi Cline's consultation at Dr. Johnson's clinic presented a case study in the collision of expectations and reality.

Five years ago, with no preparation from an adoption agency, now defunct, the couple set off for the arid Kazakhstan steppes between Russia and China to claim two unrelated toddlers, Jacob and Corey, who are now 6 and 7. The Clines knew nothing of the effects of institutionalization on children, who on average experience a month of developmental and cognitive delay for every three months spent in an orphanage.

Nobody warned the Clines that institutions in the nations of the former Soviet bloc can be appalling places, where fetal alcohol syndrome, a permanent birth defect characterized by brain

damage and stunted growth, is endemic. Nobody told them that reputable agencies discourage the simultaneous adoption of more than one unrelated child.

So the Clines have spent years trudging from doctor to doctor, seeking explanations for Corey's hyperactivity, indifference to his parents and learning difficulties. Jacob's physical development is slow, and he clings to his mother. That makes him easier to handle than his unruly, unresponsive older brother, but not necessarily less impaired.

The strains of infertility and then the jubilant arrival of two Kazakh toddlers sent Mrs. Cline reeling.

"Everybody figures you come home and you're one big, happy family," she said. "I expected it to be like a greeting card, but it doesn't happen that way. It's not like ordering something from a menu and it comes exactly how you asked for it."

Dr. Johnson, who adopted an infant from India 20 years ago, will review the boys' records, coordinate their care and most likely suggest a psychologist who understands the effects of institutionalization.

Adoption experts emphasize that the vast majority of adoptions succeed. Studies show that families back out in 10 percent to 25 percent of domestic adoptions; data is unavailable for international adoptions.

A family can refuse a referral from an agency - whether an evaluation alarms them or they change their mind - and hope for another. Once an adoption is legally completed, families unable or unwilling to keep a child generally work with their agency to find another home.

Tracy and Jeff Paschke Johannes, just back from Ethiopia with 3-month-old Shahra, made careful preparations before adoption, including getting a review here of the child's medical records and arranging an appointment for soon after the family's return. Shahra, to their delight, is not much different from other newborns.

She has dry skin from being bathed too often. She guzzles 28 ounces of formula a day, making up for lost nutrition after a bout of dysentery. She spits up because she eats too fast. Dr. Cindy Howard, who four years ago adopted conjoined twins from the Congo, suggested olive oil for the dry skin and rice cereal for the reflux. She also shared some of her experiences as a white mother of black children.

The Paschke Johanneses made a deliberate decision to adopt their children even before they married. They chose a Minnesota agency that had a new relationship with an orphanage in Ethiopia. The ratio of infants to caregivers was an unusual two to one, and Shahra was well cared for after a home birth to a 15-year-old mother.

Ethiopia, like China, is quickly earning a reputation as having good orphanages and healthy babies, with Guatemala close behind.

That is where Mary and Jim Hackney went for their first child, Mario, now 6, whose adjustment was uneventful. They expected the same when they made a second trip to adopt Alex, now 21 months old. But Alex has had one medical problem after another, including cataracts requiring surgery, a seizure and repeated ear infections.

During Alex's evaluation at the clinic, he banged his head on the wall and stared blankly when asked questions. Dr. Johnson predicted "learning challenges" for the boy but said cognitive evaluation was impossible until his hearing could be tested.

"I know this isn't what you expected," Dr. Johnson told Alex's mother. "But you're doing an absolutely splendid job."

Mrs. Hackney, who works with special-needs children, was matter of fact: "All kids present challenges. They just have their own ways of doing it."

Laurie Powell-Anderson's newly adopted son, 4-year-old Noah, also has limited language, hyperactive behavior and seizures. Noah was adopted from Kazakhstan less than a month ago along with an unrelated 11-month-old girl named Teagan. Ms. Powell-Anderson said she adopted both at the same time because she wanted two children but could afford only one trip. Such adoptions are a red flag to many professionals, and so is Ms. Powell-Anderson's selection of Noah off a Web site that lists photos, where many people considering adoption can troll from the privacy of home.

Ms. Powell-Anderson recalls being captivated by "this chunky, defiant-looking little fellow in a suit and vest." Teagan's picture was also on the Web site, "but we didn't all have that 'yes, go for it' feeling," Ms. Powell-Anderson said. She added that Noah's difficulties might come from being in multiple orphanages where different languages were spoken.

Dr. Johnson said the best medicine for Noah's behavior was a predictable routine.

"No surprises," he said. "The same stuff at the same time every day. Pretend he's in the Army. And give him work to do so he knows what it means to be part of a family. Let him set the table. Fold the laundry. He doesn't need a lot of toys. And keep him away from the TV."

Ms. Powell-Anderson rolled her eyes. "My mother-in-law already thinks I'm a Nazi," she said.

"That's O.K.," Dr. Johnson replied. "Tell her it's doctor's orders."

Adoption leader leaving

Monday, January 02, 2006

By Ted Roelofs

The Grand Rapids Press

When Glenn DeMots began his career, Bethany Christian Services was a modest local agency with a low profile.

With a 1969 budget of \$1 million and 30 employees, the organization offered West Michigan-based foster care, infant and special-needs adoption and a small infant adoption program in New Jersey.

As DeMots prepares to step down as president 36 years later, he oversees a sprawling program with a

\$60 million budget and nearly 1,000 employees in 32 states, with ministries in 13 other countries. It is among the largest private adoption agencies in the nation.

True to form, DeMots, 62, insists the growth says more about Bethany's mission than any part he played bringing it about.

"We certainly believe in what we do. The bigger the budget, the more we are serving," he said.

Others in the nation's adoption community say DeMots is too humble. Although he did not work alone, they attribute much of the agency's growth to his leadership, particularly in the realm of foster care and international adoption.

"Bethany Christian Services has grown alongside the advances in adoption," said Lee Allen, spokesman for the National Council For Adoption, a Virginia-based advocacy group.

"You have to attribute it to Glenn DeMots and their compassionate business practices."

Allen called DeMots "probably the most respected adoption leader in the country."

DeMots is to be succeeded by William Blacquiere, 54, who expects to see Bethany's trajectory continue.

On the horizon next year: adoption centers in New York and Kentucky and international adoption programs in Uzbekistan and Haiti.

Blacquiere dates his service with Bethany to 1986, acting as director of operations for seven Michigan locations before serving the past five years as chief operating officer.

Before Bethany, Blacquiere served for 13 years with Michigan's Department of Social Services, including 10 years in Kent County.

In Kent County, he was a supervisor in Children's Protective Services and a monitor of foster-care contracts between the state and private agencies.

Although much of its budget comes from government contracts, Bethany also depends on about \$11 million in annual donations. Much of that comes from the church community -- particularly the Christian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church of America -- as well as individual contributions from church members.

Blacquiere expects that relationship to continue as well.

"We are an arm of the greater Christian community, to provide services to abandoned children or children who are victims of abuse and neglect."

As for DeMots, he looks back on a career that included direct service work in foster care and adoption, supervision of family counseling, director of Michigan operations and associate director under former director James Haveman.

By the time DeMots was named president in 1990, Bethany's budget had expanded to \$14 million and its international adoption program, begun in 1984, was taking hold.

DeMots expects to maintain ties with Bethany by serving as a part-time fundraiser.

But he also believes the agency is in good hands.

"It's something I've been preparing for," he said of his departure. "There's something to be said for moving on before people want you to move on."

Published December 30, 2005

Youth charged in Lansing killing to be tested for ability to stand trial

By Kevin Grasha
Lansing State Journal

A 16-year-old Lansing teen charged with murder will undergo a psychiatric evaluation to determine if he is competent to stand trial, a judge ruled Thursday.

Everett High School student Marcus Matthews is charged with killing 69-year-old Sara Mares, who was found dead Dec. 14.

Matthews is charged with felony murder - a charge meaning someone killed a person while committing another felony.

He also is charged with arson and car theft.

If convicted, he could face life in prison.

Matthews' attorney Paul Toman would not say why he asked for the tests, which are meant to determine whether a person understands the charges against him and can help in his defense.

Wearing a hooded sweatshirt and baggy shorts, Matthews appeared calm throughout the proceeding.

About a dozen friends and relatives packed the small courtroom, including Matthews' mother, who would not give her name.

The Rev. Nathaniel Witt said Matthews attended his church, which he would not identify, and sang in the men's choir.

"He's a good young man," Witt said.

After the hearing, Matthews' mother cried as he was led past her, hands shackled behind his back, and a deputy told her she wasn't allowed to touch him.

Matthews was transferred from a juvenile detention facility to the Ingham County Jail, where he is isolated from other inmates.

He did not return a message left at the jail seeking comment.

Police say Mares was killed in an apparent robbery.

They found Matthews after tracking down Mares' car, which had been taken. A small fire had been set in her north Lansing home.

Everett Principal Dale Glynn said he doesn't remember Matthews crossing his radar.

"He's not somebody who came to the administration's attention as a potential problem," Glynn said.

Contact Kevin Grasha at 267-1347 or kgrasha@lsj.com.

December 29, 2005

GRANHOLM'S RESOLUTION: 'GO ANYWHERE, DO ANYTHING' FOR JOBS

Governor Jennifer Granholm has decided to offer up her New Year's resolution to Michigan residents by saying she will "go anywhere and do anything," to boost the state's economy.

In her weekly radio address, Ms. Granholm said the state has made good strides this year in helping Michigan's economy and that leaders are poised to do more in 2006.

"I am totally resolved to pursue the economic plan we've put in place over the past 12 months – because it's a plan that is already working to diversify our economy and to create jobs in our state today," she said.

The highlight of the 2005 strides for Ms. Granholm is what she calls a \$2 billion investment in high-tech jobs and \$600 million in tax cuts for struggling manufacturers, both of which did not reach fruition until December.

Ms. Granholm also said she is pleased that the state has placed 16,000 unemployed workers into jobs; accelerating construction projects to bring on more jobs; increasing K-12 school funding and providing more than 32,000 people with prescription drug coverage under the MiRx program.

"Michigan is setting the right course to diversify our economy, to create good paying jobs, and to protect our exceptional quality of life," she said. "I look forward to another year of growth and progress in Michigan."

MORE FUNDS AVAILABLE FOR DISPLACED WORKERS

A total of \$8.6 million in federal money has been distributed to the state's 25 Michigan Works centers to help workers who lost their jobs to overseas competitors.

The money will help with worker training, job search and relocation efforts across the state.

The money is made available through the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance program and will be administered through the Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

Michigan Works! receives funding

Friday, December 30, 2005 10:51 AM EST

LANSING - Governor Jennifer M. Granholm and Department of Labor and Economic Growth Director David Hollister have announced \$8,600,073 in federal funding to improve the job training and education provided to workers who have lost their jobs because of foreign competition.

The funding will go towards the operation of the Michigan Works! Trade program, which provides training, and job search and relocation assistance across the state. All 25 Michigan Works! service centers will receive funding.

Michigan Works! Berrien-Cass-Van Buren is to receive \$36,997.

“We want to help those who have lost their jobs quickly learn new skills so they can re-enter our workforce,” Granholm said.

“Jobs aren't just paychecks; they are the glue that holds strong families and strong communities together.”

Funding for the operation of trade programs in the Michigan Works! service centers is made available by the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance program, administered through the Department of Labor & Economic Growth.

For more information about the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth, visit the department's Web site at www.michigan.gov/dleg.

United Way makes its final push

2005 campaign has reached 80% of its goal

Friday, December 30, 2005

BY CASEY HANS

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Organizers of the 2005 Livingston County United Way campaign are making a final push to meet this year's fundraising goal of \$1.6 million.

As of late last week, the annual giving campaign was at 80 percent of that goal.

The 2005 campaign funds 2006 programs and the need is expected to be greater than ever in the coming year, as more people request help for even the most basic services, said Livingston County United Way Executive Director Nancy Rosso.

"The statistics are showing a 15 percent increase in the number of people asking for help," said Rosso, who also sits on the county's Department of Human Services Board of Directors.

"We've never seen these kind of numbers in the county before," she added.

She said local food banks also are seeing an "unprecedented increase in numbers" of people asking for help this fall.

"I guess it's a sign of the times," she said, adding that Michigan's poor economy has affected many who never had problems before.

United Way Development-Marketing Director Jeanne Clum said some of the county's middle class families are also suffering.

"There are multiple families that are affected," she said. "Our middle-class families are strapped so tightly that one more bill is going to push them over the edge."

Still, many continue to give even during tough economic times, she said.

Clum said she is confident the \$320,000 needed to meet the goal will be reached in the first part of the new year.

"We have a lot of companies that run their campaigns late - some go into January," she said.

"We're slightly ahead of last year."

With final tallies locally and reporting from out-of-county United Way chapters still several weeks away, a final report on the campaign effort should be in hand by early February, she said.

In the coming weeks, United Way staff will follow up with businesses that still have campaigns open to help them complete their efforts.

Clum said national and international needs with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and last year's tsunamis in South Asia have taken the spotlight in recent months and many in the community have donated to those efforts.

It has had an impact on the campaign, she said. But despite these appeals, local residents and businesses have not forgotten the United Way.

"When you see this much need around the country and around the world, it makes people count their blessings," she said. "We see a really, really caring community here."

United Way programs served more than 89,000 Livingston County residents in the past year with everything from community wellness to programs that support area youth. Some United Way-funded agencies include Livingston County Catholic Society Services, LACASA, the American Red Cross, the Oakland Livingston Human Services Agency and Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Clum said the number of people served by Livingston County United Way programs grows each year.

Casey Hans can be reached at chans@livingstoncommunitynews.com or at 810-844-2005.

'Giving Tree' bears fruits of students' charity

Food collected to feed the needy in Ypsilanti

Saturday, January 2, 2006

BY SCOTT DANIEL
Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Students from Willow Run's Kettering Elementary School showed their Christmas spirit this holiday season with their "Giving Tree."

Students collected canned goods and other nonperishable food to give to Ypsilanti's needy. Several hundred items were given to SOS Community Services by the students Dec. 21.

"It's very touching," said SOS Food Program Coordinator Christina Oliver. "It shows that people still have a heart to help despite the troubles they may be going through."

The food drive has been an annual event at Kettering for more than 15 years, said teacher Anita Smith. While each of Kettering's classes participated, her fourth-grade class members gathered more than 90 food items on their own.

"Students who brought in a canned good are going to get rewarded by being able to go to the Can-Can Dance in January," Smith said.

Teacher Karrie Rhodes' students began collecting items the first week of December.

"They were so excited about it," she said. "They asked a lot of questions like, 'Where is it going?' and 'who'll get the food?'"

A year ago, food went to the poor in West Virginia. Rhodes said the school decided to keep the donation in town this time.

"The kids came in with bags full of stuff," she said. "It was nice to see them giving to someone else."

Ypsilanti-based SOS helps families in need by working in partnerships that foster economic, family and residential stability. Oliver said as much as 30 percent of the food that SOS distributes comes via donations.

"Our food program runs on donations," she said. "Occasionally, we get a small grant."

Bigger donations tend to be made at Christmas time, Oliver said. Willow Run's Holmes Elementary and Ypsilanti's West Middle School also recently made donations, she said.

At Holmes, students collected more than 1,000 cans of non-perishable items, said fifth-grade teacher Syliva Segura. She said each class gathered about 100 cans.

Students boxed and delivered the food to SOS on Dec. 20, said Segura. They also took a tour of the organization's facilities.

"It was a powerful experience," said Segura.

Food is distributed to Ypsilanti's needy, generally on a walk-in basis, Oliver said. Many are homeless and some are families simply facing tough times.

"We take them at their word," Oliver said. "If they say they're in need, they're in need."

Creating relationships in the community is key to the food program's effort, she said. "Our agency has a good rapport with the community. They know we're out there helping people."

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Family provides school supplies to needy kids

Friday, January 1, 2006

By Lauren Gray

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Going door-to-door to collect donations. Rounding up cans from the side of the road to redeem for deposits at grocery stores. Counting and sorting thousands of school supplies. These are among the things the Yurcek family has done to make the Backpacks for Kids program a success.

The program, which the Texas Township family started four years ago, provides backpacks full of school supplies to needy kids in the Kalamazoo area.

In its first year, Backpacks for Kids assembled close to 350 backpacks. This past fall, more than 850 backpacks were distributed to needy children.

Ann and Jim Yurcek adopted five children, all siblings, who had spent five years separated from each other in foster care. They added their adopted children to their six birth children, one of which has a rare genetic disorder.

The Yurceks said they were inspired to start Backpacks for Kids because when they were facing health and financial hardships because of their daughter's genetic disorder, the community was there to help. Now the family wants to return the favor, Ann Yurcek said.

Four of the Yurcek children received backpacks when the family was struggling, which led to the creation of Backpacks for Kids. Over the past four years, the family has used the program to distribute close to 3,000 backpacks filled with supplies.

"Somebody had to help us," Ann Yurcek said. "Now we always have a project going. It teaches our kids how to care and give back, and that is what our family is all about."

The four Yurcek kids who still live at home -- Deangelo, 17; Delonzo 16; Becca 16; and Detamara, 13 -- devote many hours of their time to the project. In the weeks before school starts they are especially hard at work, spending at least four hours a day on the project, said Deangelo, a junior at Portage Central High School.

"We know there are people in need, and we know we can help," said Delonzo, a sophomore at Portage Central. "Because we know what it feels like to not have things."

The family raises money and combs stores for school-supply discounts and then purchases backpacks, glue sticks, folders, notebooks, markers and pencils, sometimes buying out a store's supply. The kids also collect school supplies donated by the community.

The supplies are taken to the Kalamazoo County Human Services Department, 3299 Gull Road, where everything is counted and sorted to make sure there's enough to fill all of the backpacks, Delonzo said.

The family gets help from volunteers and caseworkers from Kalamazoo's court system. The caseworkers help by referring children who are in need of school supplies. Many of the backpacks are delivered to the homes of recipients, and the rest are dropped off at the Kalamazoo Gospel Mission, Ann Yurcek said.

"Giving the backpacks to the kids is my favorite part, because they look so happy when you give it to them," said Detamara, a seventh-grader at West Middle School.

The family is already busy collecting supplies for next year and have been receiving donated backpacks in the mail from all over the country, thanks to a recent story in People magazine.

Backpacks for Kids was also honored with a Disney Team All Star Volunteer project award and received \$1,000 from the Walt Disney Co. toward the project.

The program has already inspired three similar projects around the country. One was started in Sturgis by kids who had received backpacks from the Yurceks, Ann Yurcek said.

“You can go from nothing, and as long as you have the attitude that you won't give up, you can make it,” she said. “It's all about what you can do if you work hard enough.”

Generous hands send food home each Friday with hungry Vicksburg students

Friday, January 1, 2006

By Laurie A. Cerny
Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette

Students in Vicksburg schools get more than books to take home each weekend. In the backpacks of 150 needy children, food goes home.

The Generous Hands Friday Packs program helps students at all five Vicksburg Community Schools buildings.

At the end of the program's first school year, volunteers were loading supplemental food into 15 backpacks weekly for students at Sunset Lake Elementary School. Now, the group is filling 100 backpacks each week for all of the Vicksburg schools.

Each Friday, Generous Hands provides backpacks filled with food items. Children participating in the program get "kid-friendly food" like cereal, fruit cups, granola bars, juice, and easy-to-prepare meals like macaroni and cheese for the weekend. In addition, the packs include coupons for milk, eggs and bread that can be redeemed at the Felpausch Food Center in Vicksburg.

"What we have done has made a huge difference," said Mary Elzinga, vice president of Generous Hands, Inc., and a literacy-support teacher at Sunset Lake Elementary School. "We're excited, amazed and frightened all at the same time."

According to Rick Szabla, principal at Indian Lake Elementary School, having the Friday backpacks available for students since school started last fall has made a social difference. He said in many cases providing the extra food for students over the weekend can greatly help the families. "If you keep the family intact and healthy, you keep kids in school," Szabla said. Having students not come to school hungry also seems to help in the classroom. "It's a lot harder for us to focus on academics if we have kids who are stressed," he said.

The program runs year-round -- even during the summer, when school is out.

Generous Hands sprang from the Lakeland Reformed Church Women's Bible Study and Accountability Group, a group of 10 women, including Elzinga, who wanted to do something for the community. "We had just been praying for a long time for something that would make a difference," Elzinga said.

They started the program at Sunset Lake Elementary School in October of 2004, making up the backpacks at the school.

Packing operations have since been moved to space donated by Bob and Jill Thompson in a former paper mill in Vicksburg. Volunteers from each of the school buildings rotate in a backpack-filling schedule.

A \$41,000 grant from the Vicksburg Community Foundation, which is being distributed over a three-year period, helps to fund Generous Hands. The Kalamazoo Community Foundation provided a \$1,000 grant. Donations of food and money from individuals and businesses also help to support the program.

"What we figure is every pack will cost \$40 a month to maintain," Elzinga said. In an average week the program uses a minimum of 400 juice boxes.

Beside providing the Friday packs, at other times during the year -- especially Thanksgiving and Christmas -- the group adopts families and provides them with holiday meals, gifts for the children and winter clothing.

Both Elzinga and Szabla say the need appears to be on the rise. ``We work in the schools, so we see the need," Elzinga said. ``Kids who are hungry become quiet and withdrawn."

Several other school districts have contacted Vicksburg about starting similar programs. ``We were really pleased to help," Elzinga said. ``Hunger is a quiet illness in our society," she said.

The five-year plan for Generous Hands includes tutoring students, holding parenting classes and mentoring adults. Elzinga said, ``I'd like to see it (Generous Hands) grow to do a lot of different things. This (Friday packs) is just one facet."

Bronson workers donate 34,000 pounds of food

Friday, January 1, 2006

By Cedric Ricks

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Leslie Scott's children would remind her of the area's hungry residents every time she would go to the grocery store.

The kids would tell Scott not to forget about the food drive her employer, Bronson Healthcare Group, sponsored in October.

Scott, a physician office coordinator with the Bronson Women's Services program, added something extra to her grocery cart with each shopping trip.

So did many other employees across Bronson Healthcare Group, which gathered 34,000 pounds of food for Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes in October.

It was the largest amount of donated food from any health-care organization that took part in the Michigan Harvest Gathering, a statewide effort to assist food banks.

"You guys, at the very basic level, are making a difference for people in this community," said Anne Wend Lipsey, executive director of Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes.

She thanked about a dozen Bronson employees who were invited to a reception in December at Loaves and Fishes' warehouse, in Kalamazoo's Edison neighborhood.

"Thank you, incredibly much," Lipsey said.

Scott said she knew many of the patients who visit Bronson Women's Services would benefit if area food pantries were better stocked.

Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes operates nearly two dozen food pantries at sites throughout Kalamazoo County. In 2005, it assisted more than 20,000 households with emergency food supplies.

Typically, Loaves and Fishes provides a two-day supply of food, Lipsey said. She said many of the people her agency serves try to make that amount last much longer.

Bob Doud, vice president for public affairs at Bronson, said employee interest in the annual food drive for Loaves and Fishes continues to grow each year.

Bronson Healthcare Group employs about 4,000 people.

"Our employees look forward to this event," said Doud, noting that the drive netted an average donation of nine pounds of food per employee. "This is a staff-driven initiative."

Lipsey said that Bronson Healthcare Group donated 25,000 pounds of food to Loaves and Fishes in 2004 and about 10,000 pounds of food to the agency in 2003.

Lipsey said that nationally, about 38 million Americans are "food insecure"; that is, they don't know where their next meal is coming from.

Published December 30, 2005

Budget cuts: Mid-Michigan votes helped carry damaging federal plan

A Lansing State Journal editorial

Mid-Michigan's four congressmen - Republicans Dave Camp, Vern Ehlers, Mike Rogers and Joe Schwarz - helped pass a \$39.7 billion spending reduction plan this month.

They shouldn't be proud of it.

Yes, Washington has to gain control of its rampant spending. Yes, sacrifices have to be made.

Yes, no budget bill is ever perfect.

But this one wasn't even close.

Congress and President Bush made a tiny nick in our national debt by targeting programs that help ordinary Americans: Medicare, Medicaid, student loans, family assistance. There were other places to cut; other places to raise revenue. The fact Congress and the president couldn't find these places bodes ill for the fiscal future of our nation.

Let's take just one example from this deal:

Raising payments on recipients of Medicaid will save the feds \$4.7 billion over five years.

By comparison, this is the same president and essentially the same Congress that, in late 2003, agreed to a massive new Medicare prescription drug benefit. They wrote a new benefit that covers not just those most in need - the way Medicaid works - but everyone. This will cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars.

Where is the logic in putting a bigger bite on the struggling, while endorsing more spending that aids the affluent?

And where is the logic in making student loans more expensive for college aspirants? Sure, we save about \$13 billion over five years. But giving college students more debt, or making college more difficult to attain hardly makes the American work force more competitive in the global economy.

But this is what our elected leaders endorsed. Happy New Year.

Wrong time to cut aid to poor

FLINT JOURNAL LETTER TO THE EDITOR

MILLINGTON TOWNSHIP

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Sunday, January 01, 2006

JOURNAL READER

Is the holiday season really the right time to forget our fellow man? While most of us are worried about our Christmas present lists, poor families are worrying about things like heat, shelter, food, jobs and health care. Cutting what assistance we give just seems immoral to me and not what I want my country and government to be about.

James Mercer
Millington

States Take Lead in Push to Raise Minimum Wages

By JOHN M. BRODER
The New York Times

Published: January 2, 2006

Despite Congressional refusal for almost a decade to raise the federal minimum wage, nearly half of the civilian labor force lives in states where the pay is higher than the rate set by the federal government.

Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have acted on their own to set minimum wages that exceed the \$5.15 an hour rate set by the federal government, and this year lawmakers in dozens of the remaining states will debate raising the minimum wage. Some states that already have a higher minimum wage than the federal rate will be debating further increases and adjustments for inflation.

The last time the federal minimum wage was raised was in 1997 - when it was increased from \$4.75 an hour. Since then, efforts in Congress to increase the amount have been stymied largely by Republican lawmakers and business groups who argued that a higher minimum wage would drive away jobs.

Thwarted by Congress, labor unions and community groups have increasingly focused their efforts at raising the minimum wage on the states, where the issue has received more attention than in Republican-dominated Washington, said Bill Samuel, the legislative director of the national A.F.L.-C.I.O.

Opinion polls show wide public support for an increase in the federal minimum wage, which falls far short of the income needed to place a family at the federal poverty level. Even the chairman of Wal-Mart has endorsed an increase, saying that a worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford to shop at his stores.

"The public is way ahead of Washington," Mr. Samuel said. "They see this as a matter of basic fairness, the underpinning of basic labor law in this country, a floor under wages so we're not competing with Bangladesh."

The minimum wage has been the subject of fierce ideological debate since it was first established in 1938 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Business groups and conservative economists have argued that the minimum wage is an unwarranted government intrusion into the employer-employee relationship and a distortion of the marketplace for labor. An increase in the minimum wage, they say, drives up labor costs across the board and freezes unskilled and first-time workers out of the job market.

"Increasing the minimum wage is a bad move economically, philosophically and politically," said Marc Freedman, director of labor law policy for the United States Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Freedman said that any minimum wage set by the federal government was completely arbitrary and did not take local labor market costs into account.

According to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, about two million American workers, 2.7 percent of the overall work force, earned the minimum hourly wage of \$5.15 or less in 2004, the last year for which such statistics were available. Those workers were generally young (half were under 25, and a quarter were teenagers), unmarried and had not earned a high school diploma. About three-fifths of all workers paid at or below the federal minimum wage worked in bars and restaurants, and many received tips to supplement their basic wages.

Advocates of an increase in the minimum wage said that inflation had so eroded the value of the minimum wage in the last nine years that it was worth less today in real terms than at any time since 1955. They also cited studies that found that raising the minimum wage did not cause job loss, as opponents argue. According to these studies, employers can absorb the higher labor costs through efficiencies, less employee turnover and higher productivity.

Tim Nesbitt, the former president of the Oregon A.F.L.-C.I.O., said that despite having one of the highest minimum wages in the country at \$7.25 an hour, Oregon had had twice the rate of job growth as the rest of the country.

The 2006 battle over the minimum wage is expected to be particularly intense in Ohio, one of only two states that have a minimum wage below the federal level (the other is Kansas). The minimum wage in Ohio since 1991 has been \$4.25 an hour, which applies to small employers, some farms and most restaurants. Workers at larger enterprises are generally covered by the federal minimum wage.

Efforts to get the Republican-run General Assembly to consider raising Ohio's minimum wage have gone nowhere, so labor groups and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, known as Acorn, an advocacy group for low-income individuals and families, are planning a ballot initiative to put the issue to a popular vote in November.

Tim Burga, legislative director for the Ohio A.F.L.-C.I.O., said that 92,000 workers in the state made less than the federal minimum wage, some as little as \$2 an hour. The proposed Ohio Constitutional amendment would set the state minimum wage at \$6.85 an hour, indexed to future inflation, bringing an immediate raise to as many as 400,000 workers.

Former Senator John Edwards, the 2004 Democratic vice-presidential nominee, said in an interview that he planned to help organize the minimum wage campaign in Ohio as part of his national campaign to alleviate poverty. He called the current minimum wage a moral disgrace and a national embarrassment.

"My view is it should be \$7.50 an hour, and I can make a great argument for it being a lot higher than that," Mr. Edwards said. "This is a perfect example of the Republican leadership in Congress, combined with the powerful presence of lobbies in Washington, thwarting the will of the people."

Leading the opposition to the initiative will be the Ohio Restaurant Association, which like its parent organization, the National Restaurant Association, closely monitors and vigorously opposes efforts to raise the minimum wage.

"Restaurants are a low-margin business," said Geoff Hetrick, president of the Ohio Restaurant Association. "A number of marginal operations which are more or less on the ragged edge right now might find this to be the straw that breaks the camel's back, especially in northern Ohio

where they've had a significant loss in manufacturing employment that's taken a lot of disposable income out of the economy."

One of those who would be affected by the proposed minimum wage increase in Ohio is Rick Cassara, owner of John Q's Steakhouse in downtown Cleveland. He said that while all of his 55 employees currently earn more than the minimum wage, he opposed a mandated increase because it would drive up all of his labor costs. "It exerts upward pressure on all wages and prices," Mr. Cassara said. "If the minimum wage is \$7 and I have to pay \$8 or \$9 to hire a dishwasher, then the cooks are going to say they want more. How much can I charge for that hamburger?"

Another small employer, Dan Young, owner of Young's Jersey Dairy in Yellow Springs, a working farm and restaurant operation, said that more than half of his 300 workers were high school and college students, many of them in their first jobs. He said he paid many of them \$5.25 an hour, just above the federal minimum wage, but most quickly won raises or earned far more than that in tips.

Mr. Young said that if Ohio enacted a Democratic proposal to raise the state's minimum wage by \$1 an hour over the federal level, his labor costs would go up by \$250,000 a year or more.

"When you do all the math," he said, "I'll have to figure out a way to hire fewer workers, or raise prices, or both."

In 2004, voters in Nevada and Florida approved ballot initiatives raising the state minimum wage to \$6.15 an hour, in both cases by more than a 2-to-1 margin. Nevada voters must vote on the measure again this year because it is a Constitutional amendment, but proponents are confident they will prevail. Lawmakers in California, which already has one of the highest rates in the nation at \$6.75 an hour, approved a bill last year to increase the wage to \$7.75 an hour in 2007, but Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed it, the second time he has rejected such legislation.

Mr. Schwarzenegger said then that he believed that low-wage California workers deserved a raise, but said the legislation, which contained automatic increases tied to inflation, would be too costly to employers.

But aides to Mr. Schwarzenegger said late last week that the governor would propose a \$1-an-hour increase in the California minimum wage in his State of the State address this week. If approved, the proposal would take effect over the next 18 months and would not have an automatic inflation adjustment, the aides said. The move appears designed in part to pre-empt a ballot initiative that would raise the California hourly rate an additional \$1, to \$8.75 an hour, and include annual cost-of-living increases.

Inflation indexing is also an issue in Oregon, where the minimum wage is currently \$7.25 an hour and adjusts every year for inflation under an initiative approved by voters in 2002. Each year since passage of that measure, the Oregon Restaurant Association and other business groups have pushed legislation to cancel the indexing provision or to exempt some workers from the wage law, but have so far failed. Gov. Theodore R. Kulongoski, a Democrat and former labor lawyer, has vowed to veto any such measure that reaches his desk.

Editorial

A Fair Day's Pay

The New York Times

Published: January 3, 2006

The federal minimum wage has been a paltry \$5.15 an hour for more than eight years. Polls show that there is strong popular support for raising it, but Congress has resisted. Unions, community groups and advocates for the poor are increasingly taking the matter directly to voters through state referendums to raise their states' minimum wages, according to an article yesterday in The Times. Their intentions are laudable, but the efforts only highlight Congress's failure to set the federal minimum wage at a reasonable level.

The federal minimum wage got its start in 1938, when the Fair Labor Standards Act required the employers it covered to pay workers at least 25 cents an hour. Because the law is not indexed for inflation, Congress has to pass legislation to increase the minimum wage. Its record of doing this is disappointing. The last time the minimum rose was in September 1997. Since then, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the minimum wage's purchasing power has fallen more than 15 percent. It is now less than one-third of the average wage for private nonsupervisory workers - the lowest percentage in 56 years.

Keeping the minimum wage at a reasonable level has appeal across the political spectrum. Liberals see a higher minimum wage as a way to lift the working poor out of poverty and narrow the gap between rich and poor. Many conservatives see it as a way to reward work. In a 2005 Pew Research Center poll, 86 percent of respondents, including 79 percent of social conservatives, supported increasing the minimum wage to \$6.45 an hour.

But the idea has some influential opponents. Business interests, led by the restaurant industry, have lobbied to keep the minimum wage low. Some free-market conservatives, heirs to the original opponents of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, oppose it on ideological grounds. In recent years, these forces have prevailed. The same Congress that has passed huge tax cuts for wealthy individuals and corporations has consistently refused to help those on the other side of the economic divide.

In 2004, supporters of a higher minimum wage had impressive success in statewide votes. In Florida and Nevada - both states that went for President Bush - voters passed referendums to increase their states' minimum wage laws by margins of roughly 70 to 30 percent. This year, there may be ballot initiatives in seven states, including Ohio and Michigan (and Nevada will vote again). Some political analysts say the initiatives could help Democratic Congressional candidates by drawing low-income voters to the polls, just as referendums in 2004 to oppose gay marriage helped the turnout of Republican-leaning voters who are religious conservatives. State minimum-wage referendums are not ideal. Policy matters of this kind are best handled by legislatures, and the nation would be better off with a uniform federal standard. But given where the federal minimum wage now stands, state-level initiatives are the only game in town. Those grass-roots debates may shame Congress into taking long-overdue action to help the lowest-paid workers.

Michigan Report

December 29, 2005

D.H.S. AUDIT OFFICE IMPROVES: Another follow-up audit of the Office of Internal Audit for the Department of Human Services found widespread compliance with recommendations issued in a 2003 report by Mr. McTavish.

A report released in 2003 cited the DHS Office of Internal Audit for poor planning, ineffective assessments and inadequate corrective measures to unfavorable audits conducted by the office.

The follow-up, covering May through July 2005, found that DHS has complied with the 2003 recommendations by taking steps to improve departmental audits. Since the original recommendations, DHS has developed a supervisor's checklist to ensure effectiveness and consistency and the agency improved tracking and assessments practices by storing information in a general database.

The OIA reports to DHS management and is responsible for measuring and evaluating the department's internal control systems. The OIA covers 115 DHS offices and oversees all audit-related activities while providing improvement plans and resources to supervisors. At the time of the follow-up audit, OIA employed 14 people.

Published December 30, 2005

Tim Skubick: Getting better at her buh-byes

Like all governors, Granholm wields ax, with varying skill

By Tim Skubick | For the Lansing State Journal

Governors hate to fire people they hired.

But Bill Milliken showed the door to his former running mate Jim Dammon. Jim Blanchard said adios to his welfare director, Sister Agnes Mansour. And nobody knows how many "bodies" John Engler disposed of during his 12-year reign of terror.

Governors are forced to perform this unwanted surgery, because if they don't the "patient" can easily become a political liability.

The objective is to do it quickly and quietly. Unfortunately for Gov. Jennifer Granholm, on this front, it has sometimes been messy, protracted and loud - although she has improved after a shaky launch.

In removing her first welfare director, Nannette Bowler, Granholm first called her a valuable member of her Cabinet and then, weeks later, accepted Bowler's not-so-surprising resignation.

The governor opined, "Ms. Bowler has always wanted to be a judge." So they give her a judgeship. Nobody in town bought that malarkey for a second.

Granholm Evacuee No. 2 was much more fun ... for the media, but certainly not for her. She wanted State Superintendent Tom Watkins out, but it took seven months to do it. Watkins dug in his heels. Granholm made the situation worse by calling Watkins, too, a valuable member of the Cabinet.

When the dust settled on Watkins, the governor blamed the media for breaking the story that the two were at odds. She amazingly claimed that if it had not been reported, she would have handled it with more panache.

Next there was Don Jakeway, who may have been doomed from the get-go. He was from Ohio and a republican. And, if that wasn't bad enough, the director of the Michigan Economic Development Corp. had monstrous "communication and turf issues" that eventually gobbled him up.

This time however the Granholm team pulled it off with little media reportage. The cover story was Jakeway was merely moving on to greener pastures when, in reality, he was being asked to leave the farm.

Which brings us to an impending departure, No. 4: Michigan Department of Transportation Director Gloria Jeff. She has been advised to get out of Dodge by Feb. 1.

Jeff is a political liability with a capitol "L." On top of the fact that she had single-handily hacked off a raft of legislators with her aggressive style, the apparent last straw was her freelance and clumsy attempt to reform the Mackinac Bridge Authority. That little group is packed full of good ol' boys who thought "reform" was a four-letter word.

Jeff undertook the commendable reform mission, but without giving the gov a heads up. Granholm got wind of all this one week after Jeff and the authority members had a very public scrum.

Like a firefighter on an emergency call, the governor had to rush in to extinguish the blaze that threatened her political base in the Upper Peninsula.

Having learned from her previous encounters, the governor was given the chance to call Jeff a valuable member of the Cabinet. This time, she rejected the bait, saying, If there was an announcement, it would come from Director Jeff."

Anyone with an ounce of brains can read between the lines on that one ... Jeff is on her way out. And heading into her fourth year, this governor is getting more deft with the scalpel.

What do you think? Tim Skubick is a local television correspondent who writes a column for the State Journal on Fridays. Write him c/o Lansing State Journal, 120 E. Lenawee St., Lansing, MI 48919.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 29, 2005

Governor Granholm Declares January Mentoring Month

Joins First Gentleman in Encouraging Residents to Mentor a Child

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm declared January Mentoring Month and is calling on people around the state to step forward and mentor children in their community. The Governor's proclamation coincides with the observance of National Mentoring Month in January.

"Mentoring transforms the lives of children and adults," Granholm said. "By strengthening our children through mentoring, we are building a stronger future for them, our communities, and our great state."

As attorney general, Granholm created the Mentor Michigan Initiative, now lead by First Gentleman Daniel G. Mulhern. Mentor Michigan is a statewide effort to raise awareness about the need for mentors and the benefits associated with mentoring. As a result of the Initiative, organizations across the state are coming together to encourage people to mentor a child.

The Governor and First Gentleman mentor children from the Lansing area and are among the 99 percent of mentors who would recommend mentoring to others. They believe the experience enriches many more lives than the life of the mentee.

"Mentoring is one of the most rewarding experiences you can have" Mulhern said. "Our experience with mentoring has enriched our family's life as well as the lives of our mentees."

The First Gentleman is urging men, particularly men of color, to step forward to mentor children in Michigan.

Mulhern cited a recent study released by Kahle Research Solutions, Inc. that showed only 33 percent of mentors in Michigan are men. The study also showed that while 36 percent of the mentees are children of color, only 24 percent of the mentors are people of color. This disparity creates a dilemma for mentoring programs trying to match children with mentors from the same ethnic and gender backgrounds.

"Mentoring programs from across the state have expressed the desire to put the 'men' back in mentoring," Mulhern said. "Many programs are not enrolling boys, because there are no male mentors available. This is a missed opportunity for everyone who stands to benefit from mentoring."

As part of Mentoring Month, Granholm, Mulhern, former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, and Detroit Pistons player Chauncey Billups are being featured in televised public service announcements promoting mentoring. The First Gentleman and the Governor are encouraging mentors across the state to celebrate National Mentoring Month by recruiting their friends and family to be mentors.

Additionally, the Michigan Community Service Commission, chaired by Mulhern, has program information and resources on the Mentor Michigan website to help future mentors find an available mentoring organization in their community.

For more information, call 1-800-VOLUNTEER or visit www.mentormichigan.org.

Mentor Michigan is managed by the Michigan Community Service Commission, a state agency that builds a culture of service by providing vision and resources to strengthen communities through volunteerism.

Visit www.michigan.gov/mcsc or call (517) 335-4295 for more information.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
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News Release

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January is Stalking Awareness Month in Michigan

January 3, 2006

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm has proclaimed January 2006 Stalking Awareness Month in Michigan. Michigan was among the first states in the nation to observe Stalking Awareness Month.

“Stalking Awareness Month emphasizes the serious consequences of this criminal activity,” Granholm said. “Often stalkers know no boundaries in their intimidating, violent behavior. We should all do what we can to provide support to stalking victims, and to collaborate to promote safety in our homes, neighborhoods and workplaces.”

Crimes of stalking can have a devastating and, too often, deadly impact on their victims. When unwanted attention and personal contacts – such as phone calls, letters, e-mails and other unsolicited personal contacts – escalates, the results can have a profound impact on victims, psychologically, physically and financially. Stalking strikes terror in the hearts and lives of victims and comprises a real and frightening threat to them, their loved ones and our communities.

Michigan law defines stalking as “a willful course of conduct involving repeated or continuing harassment of another individual that would cause a reasonable person to feel terrorized, frightened, intimidated, threatened, harassed or molested.”

Stalking became a crime in Michigan in 1993. Since 1990, anti-stalking legislation has been enacted in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. About 1.4 million people are victims of stalking in the United States every year. One in 12 women and one in 45 men will be stalked in their lifetimes. Seventy-seven percent of women and 64 percent of men know their stalker.

“It is important that stalking victims report the crimes to law enforcement,” Marianne Udow, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, said. “Victims can also contact their local domestic or sexual violence program for advocacy, counseling and, if necessary, shelter services.”

The Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board funds agencies that provide those services statewide. Members of the legislatively enacted board are appointed by the governor and are charged with leading statewide efforts to eliminate domestic violence in the state. The board is administratively housed within the Michigan Department of Human Services.

“It is important for stalking survivors to know they are not alone and that there is help,” said Debra Cain, executive director of the Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board. “Stalking Awareness Month affords us the opportunity to share this critical information with survivors in Michigan.”

For more information about the Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board visit its Web site at www.michigan.gov/domesticviolence